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IV.

THE SEVERED HAND.

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1886.

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THE SEVERED HAND.

I.

THE Boulevard de la Madeleine is certainly not a pleasant place on a November night when a heavy gale is driving the fallen leaves over the broad sidewalk, when the fog shrouds every object in a grey veil through which even the yellow glare of the gas lamps is scarcely visible, and when the trees bend and groan under the gusts of the westerly wind. All the promenaders have disappeared, and the people that fill the streets on summer evenings have taken refuge in clubs, cafés, and wine shops. Only an occasional vehicle passes noiselessly along; and the sole sound is a far off murmur which seems like the regular breathing of the great city.

Still, when a man is twenty-five and has both money and spirits to spare, he laughs at autumnal fogs, and pursues his way without troubling himself about coming showers. It was thus with two young fellows who, after a protracted dinner, sallied forth for a walk in this deserted region. Both were tall, well built, and elegantly dressed, and as they walked on side by side, with their hands in their pockets and their overcoat collars turned up to their ears, they talked loudly and punctuated their conversation with ringing laughter. In height and carriage they were so nearly alike that a passer-by might have taken them for brothers, and yet in lineaments they did not in the least resemble each other. One was dark, the other fair. One had irregular features, sharp, black eyes, a bold and expressive face, and a rather abrupt and decided manner. He might have been taken for an officer of hussars fresh from Saumur. The other, however, had finely cut features, blue eyes, and the mild expression and calm, dignified bearing of an English gentleman. Two clearly defined and well contrasted types.

"My dear fellow," said the dark one, as the heels of his boots resounded on the asphalt, "you are crazy to think of walking to the Rue de Suresnes in such weather. It is going to rain pitchforks."

"Nonsense; your uncle's house is not far off. We shall reach it before the storm begins."

"And we shall have saved two francs in cab hire. Such economy is commendable. I admire you, Jules; you will be a millionaire."

"I hope so, my dear Maxime; but I can predict that at the present rate you will soon come to the end of your fortune. You are wrong not to heed Monsieur Dorgères' advice; he is very fond of you, and if you would only settle down and go to work in his banking-house there would be nothing to prevent your marrying your cousin."

"Thanks ; I haven't the slightest desire to marry. Besides, although Alice is very charming, she would not at all suit me as a wife."

"You are hard to please."

"Not at all ; but I can't realise that my cousin is anything more than a child. Besides, I fancy my uncle wishes her to make an aristocratic marriage."

"On the contrary, I believe he wishes to make his son-in-law his partner and successor."

"Then he could not make a better choice than my friend Jules Vignory, the model cashier and accomplished gentleman, who is equally capable of directing great financial schemes and leading a cotillon."

"You are mad. I don't look so high."

"Why not ? My uncle holds you in high esteem, and I am sure you are a favourite with Alice. If I were in your place, I should pay court to her."

"I shall take good care not to do so. I have no desire to get into trouble with Robert."

"Robert de Carnoël, my uncle's secretary ! What, do you think he is in love with her ?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Really, now, it occurs to me that he did watch her a great deal the other day at the table. Well, since you retire from the field, I should not be sorry for him to marry her. He isn't rich, but he is kind-hearted and intelligent, beside being well born and bred. You are very intimate friends, are you not ?"

"Very."

"Then he must have made you a confidant of his love affairs."

"No ; he is extremely reserved on this point, but I have divined his secret. He is madly in love with Mademoiselle Alice, and I should not be surprised if he soon ventured upon a decisive step. I think he will shortly ask Monsieur Dorgères for his daughter's hand. I should be very glad if he succeeded, but I fear he won't."

"And so do I. Still, if Alice loves him, my uncle is not the man to thwart her. But it is beginning to rain."

"That doesn't matter. We are almost at the door."

In fact, they had reached the Rue de Suresnes, and the gateway of M. Dorgères' handsome residence was already in sight. The banker was a widower, and had only one child, a daughter, who was still rather too young to preside at any large social gatherings. However, every Wednesday her father entertained a small number of friends, and on such occasions he laid great stress upon the presence of his nephew, although the latter did not find these "at homes" at all enjoyable. M. Dorgères' cashier, Jules Vignory, and his secretary, Robert de Carnoël, were also always invited, and no longer attempted to evade an invitation which was almost equivalent to a command. Robert lived in the house, and he had been in the drawing-room some little time already when Jules and Maxime, who had dined together, reached the outer door.

The rain was beginning to sting their faces, and Jules was on the point of hastily pulling the bell, when Maxime, who was a little in the rear, prevented him by saying in a low voice ; "It's strange, but there is a light in the strong-room. Do the clerks work there now until eleven o'clock at night ?"

"Not that I'm aware of," replied Vignory, retracing his steps to look at the window to which his friend was pointing.

The banker's private residence was at the further end of the courtyard, and his offices occupied the first floor of an advanced building bordering the Rue de Suresnes. The windows were protected by gratings, and through the closed shutters of the one nearest to them there shone the faint light which had attracted the attention of M. Dorgères' nephew.

"It is nothing," remarked Jules, after reflecting. "Probably the watchman is making his round before going to bed. Have no fears, my friend; the safe is well guarded. Besides, it is armed in such a way that the fellow who tries to force it will be the greatest sufferer."

"Yes, I know. My uncle has told me that his safe is provided with a host of murderous engines. It is a regular arsenal, and if a thief tampered with the lock he would be instantly killed."

"Your uncle was only jesting; but the fact is, the thief would be caught in a trap like a wolf. An ingenious machine would seize him by the wrist, and it would be utterly impossible for him to free himself."

"That is a capital arrangement. Come, let us ring and go in; this is not a very pleasant place to talk."

The cashier pulled the bell, the door opened, and Maxime entered first. As he did so he came in contact with two persons who, no doubt, had also been waiting for the porter to pull the rope, for they stood close to the inner side of the door, and when it opened they darted out without apologising or bowing. One of them was very tall; while the other was of medium height, and leaned upon the arm of his companion. They both wore hats drawn down over their eyes, and large comforters. Their faces were effectually concealed, but they were well dressed, and no doubt they had been spending the evening in M. Dorgères' drawing-room.

"The deuce!" muttered Maxime, as his friend closed the door; "we arrive just as the other guests are leaving. We shan't be very graciously received, for my uncle is very exacting on the score of punctuality."

"Look!" he added, glancing into the porter's room; "Father Denlevant is sound asleep in his arm-chair."

"That is his usual habit," replied Vignory, "and if the safe had no other protector——"

"It would be very inadequately guarded, certainly; but Malicome always sleeps in the office. The money is safe, and that is the main thing."

"Malicome never returns before midnight, and I have not much confidence in his watchfulness. He is very intemperate, and spends all his evenings in wine-shops. I think I shall go and take a look at the safe. Go up to the drawing-room, I will join you there."

"Oh, I'm in no hurry. We will inspect the strong-room together, and then you shall help me to face my uncle."

"Very well; but don't let us lose time," replied Jules, turning to the right instead of crossing the courtyard to reach the front steps.

"Look!" suddenly exclaimed the young cashier, "the office door is partly open."

They first entered a room used by clients when they came to draw or deposit money; in fact an outer office, connected with the apartment where the safe was placed by a door which also stood open. Hastening on, they found the strong room empty; but a lamp standing upon a table cast its light over the stacks of drawers, closed gratings, and desks covered with scales, stamps, and punches. In the darkest corner stood a large safe of burnished steel. "Who can have been working here at this

hour?" exclaimed Vignory. "Monsieur Dorgères is the only person who has a key."

"Then it must have been he."

"You forget that he has company. Besides, he would not have neglected to extinguish the lamp and lock the door. All this is very strange, but I don't think the safe has been tampered with."

"Are you sure?" muttered Maxime, approaching it. "Let us see. You are mistaken, my friend. It has been tampered with to such an extent that the trap has performed its functions."

"What?"

"Look at those two iron arms ending in something like pincers that cover the lock——"

"If they are united some one must have attempted to pick the lock," faltered Vignory. "But how can the thief have succeeded in making his escape? The machinery can't be worth much."

"On the contrary, it has performed its work only too well," said Maxime, stooping to examine the trap. "It has not caught the thief, but it has cut off his hand."

"Impossible!"

"Bring the lamp and you will see. The hand remains in the vice, and what is strangest of all, it is a woman's hand."

"A woman's hand!" repeated Vignory, who was so agitated that in lifting the lamp he nearly let it fall. He succeeded, however, in bringing it to the safe, and then saw that his friend was right. The protecting instrument had indeed performed its work: the two arms of the ingenious contrivance had suddenly closed, and seized the bold hand that had attempted to force the lock.

"These are what I call extreme measures," exclaimed Maxime. "To prevent thieves from opening a safe is all very well, but to mutilate them is too much, and, moreover, it is useless since it does not prevent them from making their escape."

"But the arms were intended to seize, and not to cut," murmured the young cashier. "The proof of this is that the hand remains."

"You are right. If the hand had been amputated by the machinery it would have fallen, while the vice still holds it. It is incomprehensible, unless the hand has been severed by a sword or a hatchet."

"Severed by whom?"

"By the thief herself. Rather than be captured she sacrificed her hand."

"That seems utterly impossible."

"On the part of an ordinary thief, yes; but women are capable of anything—and this hand certainly belonged to a woman—and to a fashionable lady, too. Look at the tapering fingers and the almond-shaped nails. She also wore a ring, which she had the *sang-froid* to remove after the amputation, but which has left a mark upon her flesh. She prized this ring, no doubt, and as she could not extricate her hand she removed an ornament that might afterwards have led to her identification."

"But how could she have had strength to leave the room? She would certainly have fainted, and the loss of blood alone would have killed her. There is a pool of blood on the floor."

"Yes, and it has flowed to the desk upon which we found the lighted lamp. We must see where this stops. Hold the lamp for me."

Vignory mechanically obeyed, scarcely conscious of what he was

doing. Maxime, on the contrary, was quite cool, and conducted his investigations calmly and systematically. "I see," he exclaimed, when his friend had replaced the lamp on the desk, "the thief had an accomplice."

"How do you know that?" faltered the astonished Vignory.

"It was the accomplice who performed the amputation. I suspected it. To amputate one's own hand is a little too heroic for a woman. Besides, she would not have been able to repair the consequences of the mutilation unaided. This ball of twine furnished a ligature for the stump so as to check the flow of blood, which was first staunched with this sponge taken from your inkstand. The wound was bandaged with one of the napkins you wipe your hands upon after you have handled money. There is one all stained with blood. After the accomplice had finished dressing the wound he took his patient away. She, perhaps, was still able to walk, or else he carried her in his arms."

"How did they leave the house?"

"In the same way that they entered it. They must have had a key to unlock the office, for there is nothing to indicate that the lock was forced. They left in the same way, and in great haste, for they did not even stop to close the door behind them; and they forgot to extinguish the light."

"And that stupid porter allowed them to pass unquestioned! But, now I think of it, we perhaps met them—that couple crouching near the door when we came in!"

"Impossible. We only met two men. The thief and her accomplice escaped before Father Denlevant admitted us. Being asleep as usual, probably, he failed to notice them. We can spare ourselves the trouble of following them. They are already far away."

"Still, the woman could scarcely have been able to walk."

"They would take a cab. I feel certain these people were no common thieves; and I think they had some knowledge of the habits of the household. The day and the hour chosen are sufficient proof of this. They knew that M. Dorgères received company on Wednesdays; that all the servants would be busy; that the porter would not be likely to notice them, and that the man who sleeps in the strong-room was not in the habit of returning until late."

"Who knows, indeed, if some member of the household did not help them to conceal themselves in the house? Monsieur Dorgères must be informed at once."

"Do you think so?"

"It seems to me absolutely necessary."

"I don't agree with you. You will do as you please; but, if I were in your place, I should say nothing to my uncle or to any one."

"What! you advise me not to mention an attempted robbery, which may be repeated to-morrow? You forget that I am responsible for the safe."

"It is precisely because you are responsible that you ought not to mention this singular adventure. My uncle is not always just, and would, perhaps, accuse you of carelessness. He would be wrong, for you cannot spend your life in mounting guard over his gold; but, for all that, you would certainly be blamed."

"I would rather expose myself to censure than secure impunity for the thieves by my silence."

"Do you imagine the police will arrest them, if you make the affair public? No, they will get on a false scent, and the newspapers will mix themselves up in it. All Paris will talk about the severed hand, and our rascals will take good care to elude capture. Believe me, this affair isn't one of the kind that police agents are likely to clear up."

"Do you flatter yourself that you could find the thieves unaided?"

"Why not? But to do so the secret must remain between us two."

"But this hand that is here——"

"I have no intention of leaving it here. Now, do me the favour to close the outer door of the office. I have given up all idea of playing whist with my uncle this evening, and, so I suppose, have you. So draw the bolt and let us make haste."

Vignory hesitated a little, but finally obeyed, for Maxime exerted a certain authority over him. Maxime feared nothing. He was a shrewd and quick-witted youth; and besides he was the nephew, and Vignory only the clerk of the banker. "Now that I have done what you wished," said the young cashier a little sulkily, on his return, "I hope you will explain your intentions without further delay."

"Willingly, after you have replied to a few questions. First, show me how this safe can be opened without accident."

"Oh, that is very simple. It is only necessary to have the key and know the word, which must be formed from the letters of the alphabet that are on the movable buttons on the door. If the five letters composing the word have not been put in their proper places, the key will not act. I have a key, and your uncle has one, and we two are the only persons who know the word. This invention is not new, but we have added an improvement—the two arms which have just fulfilled their mission. Every evening before leaving the office I lift a spring that holds them, and then I go away easy in mind, for no one can touch the lock without being caught by the wrist. When I return in the morning I turn the crank, so that the iron arms can no longer come together, and then I open the safe without the slightest difficulty."

"But what if you forget to take this precaution, or if my uncle came in during the evening to get some money from the safe?"

"Monsieur Dorgères would never attempt to open it without first taking the necessary precautions; but in case either of us did forget, we should only have to endure a rather uncomfortable pressure. Your uncle would call Malicorne, who sleeps in the outer office, and who would have no difficulty in releasing him."

"Very well. Now suppose some one having neither the key nor the word tried to pick the lock with some of the instruments in vogue among burglars?"

"He would inevitably be caught."

"Now, how was the attempt made just now?"

"With a picklock, no doubt. Your uncle always keeps his key in his pocket, and mine never leaves me. These scoundrels couldn't have had a third made."

"It is scarcely probable; still, before deciding I should like to examine the safe more carefully. Hold the light for me once more."

The cashier obeyed without a word, and Maxime began a minute inspection.

"My dear fellow," he said almost immediately, "I have never seen a picklock, but I suppose that instrument is longer than a key. If that

had been the implement used, it would have remained in the lock, for there would have been no way of withdrawing it. The severed hand almost touches the lock, but between the latter and the tips of the fingers there is still room for a little key, which the accomplice might possibly have removed. Let us see, now, what these movable buttons say. To form the word each letter must be brought under the indicating arrow, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, the first letter is an M; the second an I; the third a D; the fourth an A; the fifth an S. Total, Midas. Is that your word?"

"The same."

"Then I advise you to change it, for the thief knows it. She is evidently well informed and not to be daunted by trifles. But to return to this hand, which certainly might be that of a princess. See, it is the left one, so the lady is left-handed, or rather she *was* so, for henceforth she must make her right hand serve. Now do me the favour to move the spring that replaces the arms. I want to examine the hand more thoroughly."

"You certainly don't mean to touch it?"

"Yes I do, for otherwise every one will know to-morrow morning what has taken place."

The cashier felt that his friend was right, and he stooped and pressed a spring in the lower part of the safe. Scarcely had he done so than the hand, released from the clasp that held it, fell to the floor.

"A bracelet—there is a bracelet on the wrist!" exclaimed Maxime. "I was certain we should make some new discovery."

It was indeed a bracelet—a wide circlet of gold, ornamented with a large turquoise and two superb diamonds, the brilliancy of which contrasted strangely with the blood that oozed from the wound. Maxime coolly picked up the hand and laid it on the desk upon which Vignory had just placed the lamp. "It seems to me I must be dreaming," muttered the young cashier.

"No, it is all real," said Maxime; "and evidently I was not mistaken in my conjectures. When a woman prefers losing a hand to being brought before the Assizes, she has a reputation to preserve. An ordinary thief would not give the tip of his finger to escape detection. But the heroine of this adventure is of a different stamp, and I am now certain that she had an accomplice in my uncle's house, for she knew the word 'Midas'."

"But Monsieur Dorgères and myself are the only persons who know the word, and I change it very frequently. I even changed it to-day at six o'clock. I was alone in the office; your uncle came in, and I asked him to mention a word of five letters which would be easily remembered. He answered 'Midas.' I am sure no one could have heard our conversation, unless the walls have ears. After closing the safe I went to the Café Riche, where we had agreed to dine, and your uncle returned to his private room; he certainly never confided the secret of the new word to any one."

"Still, the thief did not guess it. Some one must have revealed it to her. My uncle, no doubt, never committed an indiscretion which came near costing him so dear. On the other hand, although the lady was well informed on some points she evidently did not suspect the existence of the trap, as she allowed herself to be caught in it."

"The clerks don't know of it. It is the first time it has acted, and, as you perceive, it is cleverly concealed by the projecting border around the safe."

"People are not in the habit of entering this room, I think?"

"Certainly not. The only persons who enter it are two clerks, who work under my orders, three collectors who never remain here—and Malicome, who sweeps it in the morning, and who sleeps at night in the outer office."

"In your enumeration you seem to have forgotten the boy my uncle took out of charity."

"Oh, he never sets foot here. I have ordered him to remain in the outer office, but he is very seldom to be found there. He spends most of his time in the street, and as soon as the shutters are closed he flies off."

"Then he does not sleep in the house?"

"No; he lives with his mother at Montmartre or Batignolles, I forget which. He is only twelve or thirteen; still he is as sly as a monkey."

"I must question him."

"Then you persist in your plan of opening and conducting an investigation unaided? It is folly to do so. Your investigation will amount to nothing; and if Monsieur Dorgères ever learns that an attempt was made to force the safe, he will be greatly displeased at my not telling him."

"He will never hear of it; but if it should by any chance come to his knowledge, I will take the whole responsibility upon myself."

"And how can he fail to discover the truth? What is to be done with this blood, and this hand, and this bracelet?"

"I will remove the blood, and as for the hand, I am going straight to the Pont de la Concorde to throw it into the Seine. I do not feel equal to embalming it and preserving it as evidence. I must even confess that I can't bear looking at it or even touching it; but I shall not be compelled to keep it long. As for the bracelet, I am going to take possession of that, and it shan't leave me until I find its owner. She certainly won't send to the Lost Property Office for it, but I shall return it to her some day or other." And as Vignory shrugged his shoulders, the banker's nephew added: "I shall succeed, my friend, never fear. This bracelet is not like those that are sold in the Palais Royal, or even in the Rue de la Paix, and I fancy it was not made in France. The thief must be a foreigner; and I should not be surprised if she moved in the same circles as myself. As I have nothing better to do, I shall devote my time to finding the thief. My uncle is constantly accusing me of being good for nothing, but I mean to convince him of the contrary, for when I have succeeded, I shall tell him the whole story. Besides, I am beginning to weary of my present life, and I have squandered enough of my capital; so now I intend to employ my time in a useful, economical, and agreeable manner."

"Agreeable!" growled Vignory; "that depends upon taste. What pleasure can you take in hunting out a thief?"

"The greatest possible pleasure, my dear fellow. I have always been fond of rebuses, difficult problems, and enigmas. I am devoted to the chase, so I was born for a detective. My parents opposed me in my choice of a profession, but now that an opportunity of embracing my natural vocation presents itself, I shall seize it."

"Your reasons lack common sense. Of course I can't prevent you from following this course, but I hope you won't count upon my aid."

"No, only upon your silence."

"But if the safe were again attacked?"

"Oh, the thief won't be in a condition to resume operations for some time. Besides, you must take your precautions. And first, change the word."

"Yes, I will do so immediately," replied Vignory, taking the key from his pocket, and opening the safe. His companion, who was holding the light, could see that the safe was well filled. Rouleaux of gold and piles of bank notes covered the shelves, and there were also some large packages of deeds and bonds of divers shapes and colours, with a singular-shaped casket of polished steel. Maxime, who was naturally inquisitive, inquired what this last contained.

"Valuable securities and family papers; it is a deposit left by one of our richest customers," replied Vignory. "You see I am preparing to change the combination. What word shall I substitute?"

"A word of five letters? Well, take my cousin Alice's name; only you had better not reveal it to my uncle, for he might perhaps fancy that you were in love with her."

"How ridiculous!" exclaimed Jules. "Monsieur Dorgères knows very well that I should never allow myself to raise my eyes to his daughter; in my position——"

"A fig for your scruples! Besides, your position has nothing to do with it. You might be an office-boy instead of a cashier, but that would not prevent you from having a heart and eyes. I know that you are not thinking of Alice, but I mentioned the matter so that you might avoid any questions my uncle asked on account of the changed word."

Vignory probably decided that the advice was good, and after moving the letters so that they formed the new combination, he closed the safe and re-adjusted the arms. Maxime then returned to the table and set to work. He had to wipe up the blood and remove the bracelet, then he wrapped the hand in an old newspaper and placed it in the same pocket in which he had previously deposited the ornament. "Come, we must go," he said to his friend; "we must not be found here. Malicome will soon return. If you lock the doors no one will suspect that we have been here. Put out the light and follow me."

They met no one in the courtyard. The porter was always half asleep, and he pulled the string which opened the door without taking the trouble to see who they were.

"Now, my dear Jules," resumed Maxime, when he once more found himself in the Rue de Suresnes with his friend, "go home to sleep, and when you awake in the morning imagine that all you have seen this evening was but a dream."

"I wish it were a dream," murmured Vignory. "But what shall I tell your uncle if he asks me why I did not attend his reception?"

"Tell him that I invited you to dine at a restaurant, that I became intoxicated, and that charity compelled you to see me safely home. He will believe you, for he has a very poor opinion of my habits."

II.

M. CLAUDE JUSTIN DORGÈRES was born in a small village in the Gâtinais, where, in his childhood, he tended sheep. His father being too poor to send him to school, he would never have learned to read, perhaps, had not the village priest taught him out of charity. At sixteen he knew enough to earn his living by other means than his hands, so he started for Paris on foot, with fifteen francs in his pocket, and a letter of recommendation to a merchant given him by the priest. The merchant was glad to hire an

industrious boy, and Claude began by sweeping the store ; but it did not take his employer long to discover that the young peasant would make an admirable clerk. The lad was indeed endowed with wonderful energy and a remarkable aptitude for business. He rapidly rose in position, and finally contributed so much to the success of the establishment that he became his employer's partner and successor. Having become a wealthy man, with the capital he had honourably acquired and that left him by his father-in-law, he embarked in important transactions and soon tripled his fortune. However, prosperity did not spoil him ; his parents, loaded with benefits, died blessing him, and he then brought his younger brother to Paris, gave him an interest in his business, and found a rich wife for him.

But even the most fortunate life has its time of adversity. In the space of a few months M. Dorgères lost his brother, his sister-in-law, and his wife, and he was left with a daughter who had cost her mother her life, and a nephew, an orphan, scarcely seven years of age. This boy was sent to school, but M. Dorgères' daughter was reared under the paternal roof, where her father had the good sense not to spoil her, although he adored her. As a young girl she fulfilled all she had promised as a child, and, despite her grace, wit, and beauty, she cheerfully accepted the quiet and retired life her father loved.

However, the banker's nephew had different tastes, and afforded him much less satisfaction. On leaving college the young fellow had been unwilling to settle down to any work whatever, and on coming into possession of a very handsome fortune, he began to scatter his money right and left. In short, he had none of the qualities of his race ; he was neither prudent, nor economical, nor industrious ; still he was brave, frank, and truthful, and quite free from anything like petty meanness or deceit. His uncle had given up preaching to him, and saw him but seldom ; sometimes only once a week, at the little Wednesday reunions which he occasionally deigned to attend. Where else could they have met ? Maxime patronised race-courses, clubs, and theatres ; his life was a hunt after pleasure, while that of M. Dorgères was as carefully regulated as the clock of the Bourse. The perusal of letters, orders to stockbrokers, and interviews with influential clients absorbed his mornings ; his afternoons were spent in visits to great financiers, signing letters, and in a thousand other duties.

Still, he managed to devote one hour a day exclusively to his daughter. At twelve o'clock precisely breakfast was served in an apartment adjoining his private room, and Alice came in fresh and smiling, kissed him, and seated herself opposite him at the round table. All the dishes were prepared in advance, and no servants were present. In the evening they dined in state in the large dining-hall, and even when there was no company there was always the dignified governess, who had superintended Alice's education, together with M. Dorgères' young secretary. It was impossible to talk confidentially then, so all the young girl's confidential prattle and the father's pretended scoldings were necessarily reserved for the breakfast hour, when sometimes they talked so much that they quite forgot to eat.

The morning following the unexpected attack on the safe found the father and daughter in their gayest mood. There was not a single cloud on the financial horizon, and the banker was free for a time to enjoy his domestic happiness. To Alice, also, everything seemed tinged with rose colour. Not for the same reasons ; for the rise and fall of stocks and

commercial crises interested her but little. Her life was as calm and as transparent as the waters of a fountain. Her sky was always cloudless. Whatever might have been the cause of her contentment, one read it unmistakably in her large blue eyes.

She threw her arms round her father's neck, kissed him, took him by the hand and led him to his chair, where she seated him, and adjusted his napkin herself. He smilingly submitted, and it was strange indeed to see the usually solemn financier lend himself to this little by-play like a young collegian. With his clean-shaven face, and rather strong features, he had the air of an old Roman; contrasting strangely with his daughter Alice, who was of the laughing, blushing English type.

"Will you never make up your mind to sit down?" asked M. Dorgères. "You will never be anything but a hoyden, and yet you were nineteen years old only three days ago."

"That's true, papa; I had forgotten it, and I was about to climb on your knee."

"What folly at your age!"

"I am going to be very demure, papa. I know how to be a young lady when I choose."

"A great merit at your age. You forget that you are old enough to be married."

Alice did not reply this time. She was already seated opposite her father, and was bestowing great attention on a boiled egg. M. Dorgères, surprised at this sudden change, glanced at her and saw that she was blushing deeply. "It is time to be thinking about it," he remarked, laughing. "You have not made up your mind to be an old maid, I suppose?"

"I have made up my mind never to leave you," replied Alice, without raising her eyes.

"And who says anything about your leaving me? Do you imagine I shall select a son-in-law who will take you away from Paris?"

"I hope not."

"Still there are some foreigners who would be very eligible suitors," the banker continued, rather mischievously, "and I know one or two who might suit you. What would you think of a Russian, worth several millions?"

"You are only teasing me, papa."

"Certainly not; I am speaking seriously. Colonel Borisoff is very rich. I am sure of it, for on his arrival in Paris he deposited fifteen hundred thousand francs with me. He is of high rank, still young and good-looking, and he noticed you a great deal at the last ball I took you to; and he has not forgotten you since, for he never fails to inquire after you each time he meets me. I am sure he would consider himself extremely fortunate if you consented to marry him."

"And I'm sure I should die if you made me do so."

"Do you really mean it?" asked the banker, smiling. "Well, have no fears, you shan't marry against your will; and I have never thought for a moment of giving my little Alice to this Muscovite, who would carry her off to his horrible country of snow. Nor would I even give her to any one in the provinces, for I don't intend to be separated from her."

"Thanks, papa," said Alice, raising her head.

"So that is decided," continued M. Dorgères. "When any one asks for your hand I shall make my conditions known. This house is large

enough for a young couple, and my son-in-law must consent to live with me."

"Ah! that would be perfect happiness."

"Then you would not be sorry to marry?"

"That depends."

"I understand; you wish your husband to suit your taste."

"And yours, papa."

"Very well. The only thing now is to find him. What are your requisites? I have mine, and if they agree all will be well. Shall we say that this husband must be young?"

"Not too young."

"From twenty-five to thirty, say? Good; we shan't differ on this point. Now, he must be handsome?"

"Oh, I shall be satisfied if he has the appearance and manner of a gentleman, and is intelligent and kind at heart."

"Thus far we agree. The question of money remains."

"I am not at all anxious that he should be rich."

"Nor do I consider that at all essential; but I *do* require that he should be capable of becoming rich."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen, child. When I married your dear mother, I had little or nothing, and she brought me a large dowry; but she knew I was a worker, and thought I should rise to an independent position, and she was not mistaken."

"Do you think I would be willing to marry an indolent husband?"

"No; for if you loved such a man you would not have my blood in your veins. Then you would not refuse to marry a young man whose business habits had been formed under my supervision, and whom I might afterward associate with me in business?"

"I should be only too happy," murmured Mademoiselle Dorgères.

The banker smiled as he resumed: "Well, I know a husband and son-in-law who will suit us both so well. Since he has been in my employ he has rendered me great services. I have absolute confidence in him, and will vouch for his future. Need I mention his name?"

"Robert!" exclaimed the girl in a transport of joy that she could not repress. Then, recovering herself, she added: "Monsieur Robert de Carnoël, your secretary."

"What!" said her father with a frown, "do you imagine I was speaking of Monsieur de Carnoël?" Alice turned pale, and her eyes fell, but she made no reply. A sudden change was apparent in M. Dorgères' face. "Why do you imagine I was speaking of that young man?" he asked, in an almost severe tone.

"Isn't he your private secretary, and haven't you often told me that you trusted him entirely? Is he not what you were at his age—poor, industrious, and proud?"

The banker winced at this allusion to his past. "It is true that Monsieur de Carnoël is all this," he said coldly; "but I am surprised you should have so misunderstood me. How could you suppose I thought of taking him for a partner or a son-in-law?"

"And how could I suppose you would jest on the subject of your daughter's happiness?" retorted Alice, quickly.

"I was not jesting."

"What! you were in earnest? Then whom did you refer to?"

"To a different person. But I beg that you will listen to me, instead of asking any further questions. You are acquainted with the circumstances under which Monsieur de Carnoël entered my employ. His father had just died, after losing a handsome fortune in gambling and speculation. He had formerly been a depositor at my bank, and I had known him for several years. I was touched by the trying situation in which the son was placed. I offered him a modest clerkship, which he accepted, although he had so far lived in a circle where a man does not learn to earn his livelihood. I am glad to say that I have only had cause to praise him. I may even add that the more severely I have tried him, the more thoroughly I have been convinced of his worth; but though I would willingly do all in my power to aid him in his career, he will never be a successful business man."

"Why?" inquired the young girl, timidly.

"Because he was born a nobleman, and will always remain one. The instinct of trade, you see, runs in the blood. It is in mine, because I am of the people. I began life with privation. I was used to hunger and cold. I came to Paris barefooted, and the loft where I slept when I was a shop-boy seemed a veritable palace to me. But Robert was reared in luxury, and has only recently learned the value of money—that is, if he has learned it at all."

"He is entitled to all the more credit for his courageous efforts to regain a fortune."

"I admit it; but this merit will not enrich him. He has an excellent mind, and his manners are perfect. I am delighted to have him in my drawing-room, and I can trust him to reply to the letters of fashionable people, and to receive such visitors when they present themselves, but I should not think of entrusting him with the management of any financial operation. Not that I lack confidence in his honesty, but men of his rank in life understand nothing whatever about such things."

Alice said nothing; she was making strenuous efforts to repress the tears rising to her eyes. M. Dorgères, although more deeply moved than he cared to admit, resolved to destroy her last illusion on the subject. "What has become of your superb appetite?" he inquired, gaily. "You are eating nothing this morning. Are you ill?"

"No," faltered the young girl; "I am not hungry, that is all."

"It is my fault. I was wrong to speak to you of marriage. There is no hurry, and we will say no more about it, especially at breakfast, for all your cheerfulness fled as soon as I alluded to the subject. Let me say one word more, however. I should be very sorry to see you marry a nobleman. I don't wish my little plebeian to marry above her station. It is a prejudice, perhaps, but I have always had it, and I am too old to be cured of it. I prefer a son-in-law who is a tradesman, and the son of a tradesman. I am the son of a ploughman; Robert de Carnoël is a marquis, I believe. The social distance between him and us is too great. And after this remark, which will be the last on the subject I promise you, do me the favour, my little girl, to recover your bright smile and taste these grapes which were sent me from Fontainebleau expressly for you."

It was too much; Alice could control herself no longer, and her sobs were about to burst forth, when a slight sound made her turn her head. The door had just opened, and Robert de Carnoël had entered. Something important must have occurred for him to venture to interrupt the *tête-à-tête* between the father and daughter. He walked straight to M. Dorgères,

without forgetting, however, to bow to Alice, who gave him a look, a single one, which plainly said, "All is lost."

The young man paused and turned pale. He was tall and dark, with far from regular features, and plain, but for his expressive, impassioned dark eyes, and broad and well-shaped forehead. Elegant, however, with that elegance that is a gift of nature, reserved in manner and language, with perhaps a slight touch of haughtiness, the young secretary was a representative of a type that is fast disappearing, and M. Dorgères had reason to declare that this young aristocrat was not the man to acquire a fortune. "What is it, monsieur?" the banker asked, drily.

In addressing his secretary he usually said Robert, and the unaccustomed use of the word "Monsieur" was proof of the new situation which the girl's unconscious confession had created.

"Colonel Borisoff is here," replied the lover, striving to conquer his emotion.

"Well, let him wait. I am engaged at present."

"That is what I had the honour of telling him, but he insisted so strongly upon seeing you immediately that I took the liberty of informing you."

This firm response reminded the banker that M. de Carnoël had never yet allowed any one to address him haughtily. "Excuse me, my friend," he said, almost affectionately. "It is certainly not your fault if this Russian has called at my breakfast hour. Besides, I have finished," he added, throwing his napkin on the table.

"Please tell the colonel I will be with him in an instant."

The young man bowed and withdrew.

As soon as he was alone with his daughter, M. Dorgères approached her, and, kissing her on the forehead, said: "Be yourself again, my dear child. You are still agitated, and you need rest. A little reflection will calm you, and then you will see that your old father only desires your happiness."

Alice left the room without a word: her emotion was choking her.

"Hum!" muttered the banker. "I am not sorry that I referred to the marriage I am planning for her. This chance conversation has enabled me to discover a secret which I might not otherwise have mastered until it was too late. Alice is in love with this young scion of nobility, but there is still time enough to induce her to listen to reason, and I shall make every effort to nip this girlish fancy in the bud."

Firmly resolved upon this point, M. Dorgères passed into his spacious private room, which was only separated by a tapestry hanging from the smaller apartment in which M. de Carnoël worked. M. Dorgères had absolute confidence in the probity and discretion of his secretary. He knew that Robert was not the person to reveal on the Bourse such information as he had gathered from conversations that went on in his hearing, though not intended for his ears. Still less did he believe him capable of eavesdropping.

The young man had already resumed his seat at his desk when M. Dorgères entered the room where Colonel Borisoff was awaiting him.

The foreigner was a handsome man, broad-shouldered, erect and rather stiff in bearing, with a heavy moustache, whiskers of a military cut, and a large scar on his forehead. His hair was greyish about the temples, but his face was still young-looking, and whatever his real age might have been, no one would have thought him more than thirty-five.

"Good morning, my dear sir," he said, advancing with extended hands,

"Allow me, first of all, to inquire concerning the health of your charming daughter, and to apologise for interrupting your breakfast. I fear my indiscretion has annoyed Mademoiselle Dorgères, and I should be incon-solable if I have been so unfortunate as to displease her."

"Thank you," replied the father. "My daughter is not very well just now, but she will be grateful for your kind remembrance. May I inquire to what I am indebted for the honour of your visit?"

"Why, an official telegram which I have just received obliges me to leave Paris to-morrow. I have some money deposited with you, and——"

"You wish to draw it. Nothing could be easier, although it is not customary to draw so large an amount without previous notice; but I will have your account made up at once, and you can take the money with you."

"Excuse me, that was not my object in coming, and I regret that you have thus misunderstood me. My money could not be in safer hands, and I am anxious to leave it in your charge; but in your safe there is a casket containing some family papers and bonds of mine. Before leaving Paris, I should like to regain possession of the papers, leaving the securities with you."

"Very well, I will send for the casket at once."

"No, no, not now. I have but little time to-day. I will call to-morrow morning when the bank opens. Perhaps I shall also need a few thousand louis."

"You have more than fourteen hundred thousand francs to your credit, sir, and I have just had the honour of assuring you that the entire sum is at your disposal. Usually we only keep here the money necessary for current expenses, but it happens that this morning I have drawn from the Bank of France the sum of three millions for the payment of a dividend which is about to become due. This money is now in my safe."

Just as the banker mentioned this imposing sum, Robert de Carnoël entered with a bundle of letters which he had just classified, and which he was about to place upon the banker's desk, as usual at this hour. He was so pale that the colonel inquired in a low tone: "Who is this young man? He seems greatly agitated."

M. Dorgères made no reply, and Borisoff saw that nothing was left for him but to take leave. The banker, after accompanying him to the door, returned to Robert and said: "A word with you now, if you please."

M. Dorgères detested equivocal positions, and the same energy and clear-sightedness that had gained him a fortune now aided him powerfully in solving all difficult cases. M. de Carnoël suited him admirably as a secretary, but not at all as a son-in-law. "It is two years, I think, since you entered my employ?" asked the banker, abruptly.

"Yes, sir, two years, less one month," replied Robert, rather surprised at this beginning.

"Have you had any cause to complain of me during that time?"

"Never; and I am greatly indebted to you for your kindness."

"And is it to repay me for this kindness that you court my daughter?"

Robert started. He had not expected such a direct attack, and he made an involuntary gesture which the banker mistook for one of denial, for he said quickly: "Don't deny it; Alice has told me all."

There was a short silence. The lover, taken by surprise, was silent, fearing he might be carried away by his first impulse of passion; the father waited like a judge for the accused to justify himself. He did not

know the last of the Carnoëls. "I have nothing to conceal, sir," Robert at last replied, proudly, "for I have no reason to reproach myself. But you have chosen words I cannot accept. To court means to try to please, and in connection with a rich young girl this implies a spirit of calculation displeasing to any poor and honourable man."

"Don't haggle about words, but speak frankly. Do you love Alice?"

"I do," replied Robert, unhesitatingly.

"You confess it, then?"

"Why shouldn't I confess it?"

"And you probably think that Alice loves you?"

"Haven't you asked her? Did you not tell me that she had told you all?"

M. Dorgères did not like the idea of being questioned in this manner; besides, he knew enough, and his mind was made up. "Well, monsieur," he rejoined, "I may certainly be allowed to ask why you have so long delayed acquainting me with a fact I certainly had a right to know; but it is useless to refer to the past. I would rather tell you what I think of the situation, and what I have decided upon in view of putting an end to it."

Robert turned still paler on hearing this disheartening exordium, but he awaited what was to follow with a firmness poor Alice had failed to display.

"I confess that I ought to have foreseen this complication," continued the banker. "My daughter is young and pretty. No doubt you are incapable of seeking Alice for her fortune; you love her sincerely; but I must speak plainly, however unpleasant the truth may be. You cannot marry my daughter, for reasons which in no way affect your honour, but which Alice herself understands. I have just had a serious conversation with her, and have shown her the danger of such an ill-assorted union. She was finally obliged to admit that a woman's best chance of happiness in marriage lies in choosing a husband who is her equal in social position, if not in fortune. I am only a merchant; my daughter would be a fool to become a marchioness."

"Then, if my birth had not made me the inheritor of a title which I have voluntarily relinquished, you would not object to me as a son-in-law?"

"I did not say that, for I think you lack one essential qualification—commercial aptitude, business instinct. You possess many others, but this cannot be acquired, and without it a man cannot direct a house like mine. I am growing old, and before I die I should like to see Alice's husband take my place. I should prefer him to be rich, but that is not an absolute necessity if I believe him capable of enriching himself. Excuse me for repeating what I have just said to my daughter, and allow me to hope that you will not be offended at my rather brutal frankness. And now there only remains for me to ask how I can be of use to you. You must be desirous of escaping from this false position, and it seems to me absolutely necessary that we should part, not for ever, I hope, but for a year or two. I have a great deal of money, and large interests, in Egypt. It is a country where you could make good use of your energy and intelligence. Will it suit you to go there as my representative on honourable and advantageous terms—terms which you yourself shall name?"

Robert de Carnoël rose. "I thank you for your solicitude with regard to my future," he said. "The offer you make me is very flattering; but allow me time for reflection before accepting it."

"Consider the offer at your leisure, my dear Robert," replied the banker affectionately, "and whatever your decision may be, count upon my influence and my purse. I am and I shall always remain your friend. Time will dispel the slight cloud that has arisen between us, and I hope the day will come when you will thank me for opening a new career to you."

"To-morrow, sir, I shall have the honour of acquainting you with my decision. May I ask if you will have any further need of me to-day?"

"No, no. You are even free to dispose of your evening, for I dine out."

The young man bowed and left the room without another word.

"Poor boy!" murmured M. Dorgères, "he is inconsolable. I have been rather harsh, perhaps, but it was the truest kindness. He suffers now, but he will soon be himself again. Alice troubles me more. The most important thing was to get Robert out of the way. I think I will say nothing more to Alice about him at present. It would be an inopportune moment. Later on I trust she will accustom herself to the idea of becoming Madame Vignory. My cashier has all the qualities my secretary lacks, and is much better looking. He will try to win her affection, and with time he will succeed. I must invite him to the house more frequently. Why the devil did he not come last evening?"

While the banker was thus congratulating himself on his clever management of a love affair, Robert de Carnoël went out from his presence with despair in his soul. His dream was for ever over. The girl he adored could never be his, for he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that she would never marry against her father's will. It would seem, too, that Alice had not even protested against her father's decision, for M. Dorgères spoke as if he and his daughter had agreed on the matter. All hope had forsaken Robert, but he walked on with his head proudly erect. He had early learned to rely upon himself and to conceal his sufferings, and having uncomplainingly accepted his altered circumstances, he now felt strong enough to endure anything save humiliation.

He had but one friend. The only man to whom he could relate his misfortunes and confide his plans was this same Jules Vignory, the young cashier, who little suspected that M. Dorgères contemplated making him his partner. Robert and Jules had been friends as far back as their college days; and on leaving the banker's private room Robert's first impulse, very naturally, was to go and open his heart to this friend of his, so he immediately repaired to Jules' office. "Come, I must speak with you," he said abruptly, on entering.

Vignory promptly complied with the request, but not without previously taking the precaution to lock the safe and remove the key. "What important matter have you to communicate?" he asked.

"I wish to bid you good-by. I am going away."

"Going away? Then Monsieur Dorgères has sent you on some mission, I suppose? Indeed, I heard him say that he wished some one to represent him in Egypt."

"I am not going to Egypt."

"Where then?"

"I don't know yet."

"You don't know where? What does this mean?"

"It means that I am no longer connected with this establishment."

"What! you have been dismissed?"

"No ; I have left of my own accord."

"But why?"

"If you wish to know, come outside with me. I don't wish to be overheard—and that boy is listening to us."

"Georget? He isn't troubling himself about us; he is absorbed in watching the flies. Still, as you have some secrets to communicate, let us go out into the courtyard. I can spare five minutes, though I am pressed for time to-day."

The two young men went out, and Robert led his friend to a quiet corner where no one could see or hear them. "Jules, you are the only person who has suspected my love for Mademoiselle Dorgères."

"And her love for you. I have no doubt of it, and I sincerely congratulate you," replied Jules, in a light tone that contrasted strangely with the serious and attentive air he had worn at the beginning of the interview.

"I thought she loved me. I was mistaken."

"Is it possible? Have you not exchanged promises—vows even?"

"Yes," said Robert, "she solemnly promised to be my wife. But it was only a young girl's oath, and I was a fool to believe in it. Her father spoke, and her vow was forgotten."

"Have you seen her?"

"No, or at least I have not spoken to her, but she has told her father everything, and he has informed me that he is opposed to our marriage. He added that his daughter understood his reasons and approved of them."

"It is incredible! But what are these reasons?"

"In the first place, I am guilty of not being the son of a merchant or a labourer. Moreover, I have no talent for business, and I shall never be fit to direct a banking-house. Monsieur Dorgères wishes his son-in-law to succeed him as he succeeded the father-in-law whose clerk he was."

"And will Mademoiselle Alice consent to these conditions?"

"Certainly, since she authorised her father to say as much to me. Oh, it was done with the greatest politeness, and he graciously offered me a post in Egypt, and was pleased to inform me that a sojourn in the East would be of great service to me in acquiring the aptitudes I lack."

"He is right, perhaps. Why shouldn't you accept his proposal? Why not try to convince him that he is wrong, and that you have as much business talent as any one? Perhaps he only desires to try you? Who knows but he wishes to subject you to a sort of test before giving you his daughter. I know him, and he is quite capable of such a scheme. If I were in your place I should accept his offer."

"If you were in my place, my dear Jules, you would do what I have resolved to do. You would neither see Monsieur Dorgères nor his daughter again, but leave France never to return. I shall go to America, Australia, or Japan, it doesn't matter where, so that I disappear and hear no more of the woman who has betrayed me."

"What folly! You would exile yourself, renounce the future that awaits you, and expose yourself to every risk, simply because our employer is unwilling to give you the hand of Mademoiselle Alice? Didn't you expect he would ask time for reflection before deciding? I don't understand why you should be so discouraged on account of an opposition you ought to have foreseen?"

"I did not foresee that Alice would break her faith with me, or would be content with her father's first refusal. I thought she had some strength

of character. I was mistaken. I don't complain of my fate, but I have suffered enough, and I will suffer no more. You see that I am right to go."

Vignory listened to these unexpected revelations with considerable emotion. "My dear Robert," he said, after a pause, "you are too much excited now for me to have any hope of bringing you to reason. Besides, I cannot leave the safe any longer, as I have a large deposit to verify. I let us postpone our conversation until to-morrow."

"To-morrow I shall not be in Paris."

"Impossible! You can't start on such a journey without preparation."

"I am ready."

"But you can't go without money—a large sum of money—and I suppose you have not enough."

"I shall have it."

"I didn't know you had saved much. What I have is at your disposal, you understand; but it is not in my pocket, nor even at my house."

"Thanks. I could accept it without shame, for I know that it is cheerfully offered; but I don't need it. When I am far away I shall write to you. But I should find it hard to go away for ever without passing a few hours—the last—with you. Where can I meet you this evening?"

"I scarcely know. Maxime is to come for me at six o'clock. I have promised to dine with him, and I don't care to have him present at our interview."

"Nor I. Shall you return to the office after dinner?"

"No," replied the cashier, rather astonished by his friend's question; "it is enough to stay here all day. Besides, I fancy we are going to the theatre. Suppose I come to your room early in the morning?"

"You would run the risk of not finding me. It is hardly likely that I shall spend another night under Monsieur Dorgères' roof."

"You are certainly mad; but I shall drop in to-morrow morning. You know I rise early."

"I will see," replied Robert; "however, my time is limited, and if I don't see you again, rest assured that I shall always remember our friendship. Give me your hand."

"Where are you going?"

"Oh! I am not going to kill myself," replied Robert, who had read his friend's thought. "Suicide is cowardice. I shall never be guilty of such an act, and whatever happens, you shall hear from me. Now let me go. I am impatient to get out of this house!"

"And you are going without seeing her again? What if her father has deceived you, and her feelings toward you are not changed?"

"Then it would be her place to let me know it. But have no fears, she will soon be resigned to her father's will, if she is not so already. Monsieur Dorgères will find her a husband to his taste. He does not require his son-in-law to be rich; he only cares about his business qualifications and plebeian origin."

"Did he say that?" asked the young cashier.

"Yes, and he means what he said. Farewell."

Vignory made no further attempt to detain his friend, who at once hastened away. The cashier then returned to his office, but he felt little inclination to work. Robert's revelations had greatly increased the agitation of mind under which he had been labouring since the previous evening. He had not seen Maxime, but he had received a note from him

containing a promise of a visit at six o'clock, and of sundry interesting disclosures. The millions brought from the Bank of France had just been safely deposited in the safe, when M. Dorgères came down to inform his cashier that Colonel Borisoff would claim his casket and a portion of his deposit on the following day. At last the clerks left, and Vignory was engaged in locking the safe, when the door suddenly opened, and Maxime gaily cried: "What, haven't you yet finished locking up? Make haste. It is a splendid evening, and I want to take a walk before dinner. It will give us an excellent opportunity to talk."

"I'm ready," replied the cashier, who had completed his precautions, and was now putting on his overcoat.

"Look, that boy is still here! You had better be off, you young rascal, instead of hanging around me!"

Georget, the page, flew off like a hare, and Vignory, surprised to see him there after six o'clock, followed Maxime, who had already reached the courtyard. "I have some news," whispered the banker's nephew.

"News! What? Already? What have you discovered?"

"I will tell you when we are in the street. Here, it always seems to me that some one is listening."

The cashier involuntarily glanced behind him, but saw no one. "Go on," he said, as they reached the pavement.

"Well, last evening, on leaving you, I went to the Seine. I reached the bridge all right, but on my return I had a spy on my track. He followed me to the Madeleine, and would have followed me to my door if I hadn't met a cab with a good horse. I leaped in, and went to the Rue de Châteaudun at a gallop, and so left my spy behind me."

"But who followed you?"

"A man, whose face I couldn't see, but whose manœuvres I watched very closely. He was leaning over the parapet, and at first I passed him without noticing him. I had flung my villanous package into the river, and was retracing my steps, when I observed that he was still at the same spot; but soon he began to dog my steps."

"What does that mean?"

"That he had seen me throw the object into the river, and wished to know who I was. Now, come under this street-lamp, and I will read you a very interesting article I have just found in an evening paper. Listen attentively," and he read in subdued tones: "'This morning, a man who was fishing in the Seine, near the Pont de la Concorde, drew up the hand of a woman. Is this lugubrious haul the result of some crime? Everything would seem to indicate it, and the hand was taken to the district Commissary of Police, who immediately began an investigation. The hand will be subjected to a process of embalming that will enable the authorities to place it on exhibition at the Morgue. We shall keep our readers informed of any revelations that may follow this mysterious circumstance.'"

"What do you think of that?" asked Maxime. "I did everything to avert the interference of the police, and here chance places them in possession of this article of conviction."

"It is annoying. I was right in advising you not to meddle with this affair."

"Bah! People will talk of the hand for a week, and then it will be forgotten."

"But what if the hand were recognised?"

"By whom? Do you imagine the thief will go to claim it? My uncle suspects nothing, I hope?"

"No; he only asked why we didn't show up on Wednesday. He seemed satisfied with the story you invented. He has more important affairs to occupy him just now."

"What! has one of his correspondents failed?"

"Oh, he is rich enough to bear a loss of money with equanimity. But he has discovered that Robert loves your cousin, and that your cousin wished to marry him, and he is exceedingly angry. I don't know what he said to his daughter, but I know his secretary has left him."

"Impossible!"

"Robert himself told me of it. Monsieur Dorgères told him plainly that he wouldn't accept him as a son-in-law, and offered him, by way of compensation, a position in Egypt."

"And has he accepted?"

"Accepted! You don't know him. He is as proud as a prince, and would die of starvation rather than submit to an insult or a humiliation. He has refused everything, and resigned. He is going away."

"Where is he going?"

"He doesn't know himself, but he has decided to leave France and seek his fortune elsewhere. He pretends he has some money, but I doubt it."

"Upon my word, he is a plucky fellow, and I sympathise with him. I like independent people myself. He was right to refuse my uncle's proffered aid. At his age, with his name and gifts, it will be easy for him to make a much better match. There are plenty of heiresses who would be only too glad to marry a marquis."

"You forget that he is engaged to Mademoiselle Dorgères."

"Alice is a mere child, and a man would be a fool to trust to her promises. The love of a girl at nineteen is a fire of straw, which blazes up fiercely, but speedily dies out. My cousin will weep for him a month, and then she will begin to say that Monsieur de Carnoël cared very little about her, since he had crossed the seas instead of remaining in Paris, in the hope of seeing her from a distance when she went out in an open carriage. In three months she will listen without anger to her father's talk of the superiority of sensible marriages. In six months she will consent to be led to the altar by a sensible man. By the way, I think this sudden departure of poor Robert's makes it all plain sailing for you."

"I do not think so," replied the cashier, with some embarrassment. "Besides, what would you think of me if I tried to supplant an unfortunate friend?"

"You would do nothing of the kind. Monsieur de Carnoël has abandoned the field and gone to the Antipodes; you remain. You will see Alice every day. If, after a time, she discovers that she likes you better than her absent lover, you would have no cause to reproach yourself if her father offered her to you. Indeed, my little cousin would be a wonderful example of constancy to keep her heart for a young gentleman she will never see again."

Maxime's remarks evidently made a deep impression upon Vignory, for he listened abstractedly to young Dorgères' plans for his campaign respecting the severed hand. His promenade upon the boulevards did not cheer him, and the dinner seemed interminable, in spite of the excellent wines and the efforts the banker's nephew made to entertain him. His mind was elsewhere. However, he allowed himself to be taken to the

theatre, where he did not hear a single word of the piece, and it was past midnight when he returned to his little apartment in the Rue d'Aguesseau. His porter handed him a letter, which he read as he mounted the stairs, for he had recognised Robert de Carnoël's handwriting on the envelope. It only contained these words: "Do not expect me. I leave to-night. To-morrow I shall be far away. I shall write to you. Pity and forgive me."

This singular farewell caused the young cashier inexpressible emotion. He re-perused it a dozen times, and spent the night in commenting upon it. It did indeed seem as if this sudden departure was to decide his destiny, and when daylight came he was still asking himself if he should follow Maxime Dorgères' advice. He could not know that an extraordinary event was to put an end to his doubts that very same morning.

III.

M. DORGÈRES' bank opened every morning at ten o'clock, and punctuality was rigidly enforced in the establishment. Jules Vignory even carried this commendable habit to excess, for he invariably arrived before the appointed time, and generally prolonged his stay considerably beyond the regular business hours. Moreover, there were good reasons why he should arrive betimes that morning, for, being unable to sleep, he had risen at daybreak. Nevertheless, when Colonel Borisoff entered the outer office just as the clock struck ten, he only found Georget, the little page, at his post. The youngster stood respectfully aside to allow the noble stranger to pass, but he watched his every movement with a curiosity he scarcely took the trouble to conceal. The bearing and stature of the Muscovite evidently inspired the lad with lively admiration, for he eyed him from head to foot, as if mentally taking his measure.

M. Borisoff did not notice him: he was consulting his watch. "No one here," he muttered. "How extraordinary! At what hour do the clerks arrive?" he inquired, turning to Georget with a frown.

"Oh, they are not far off," replied the lad. "In three minutes, or three minutes and a half, you will see them all. One of them must be in the inner office just now, for the key, as you see, is in the lock. Rap on the grating."

"I believe the young scoundrel is mocking me," growled M. Borisoff. "I am sorry I have not time to pull his ears."

He contented himself with following the lad's advice, however, but though he rapped several times there was no response. At last, after repeating his knocks with redoubled violence, a face appeared at the grating, but it was so pale and agitated that the colonel did not recognise it, though he had been to the bank to draw money several times before. "I am Colonel Borisoff," he said, without further preamble. "Monsieur Dorgères, no doubt, told you that I should call at the opening of the bank to——"

"To draw some money; yes, sir, I know," interrupted Jules Vignory, in a choked voice. "Excuse me for having kept you waiting, and for asking you to wait still a little longer. I am unable to attend to you just now."

"What is the matter?" inquired the foreigner, rather haughtily.

"I have just discovered that the safe is open, though I closed it myself

last evening, and no one ought to have come in here during the night. I have not yet counted the money, but I fear that a robbery has been committed——”

“Count it, sir, count it. I will wait, but don’t be long, for I am in a hurry.”

“But I must first inform Monsieur Dorgères. It is such a serious matter that I can’t do anything unless he is present.”

“Then send for him at once, for I am greatly pressed for time.”

“Georget !” called Vignory.

The lad was not far off. Indeed, he was almost at the colonel’s heels. “Present !” he cried.

“Shut the door of the waiting-room, and go as quickly as possible to your master and tell him that I beg he will come down at once.”

“All right.”

“Then stand on guard in the courtyard, and tell every one who comes in that the office will not open until eleven o’clock.”

“And if I’m asked why ?”

“Say there has been a fire, an explosion, anything you like.”

The boy bolted the door, and then darted through the corridor to the staircase that led to the banker’s private room.

“What is the object of all these precautions ?” inquired the colonel.

“If there has been a robbery, it is not necessary for all Paris to know it.”

“You think, perhaps, it will injure Monsieur Dorgères’ credit ; but it is too firmly established to be impaired by the loss of a few thousand francs.”

“Ah ! it isn’t a matter of a few thousand francs ; the safe contained three millions last night.”

“Yes, I remember now that Monsieur Dorgères told me so. Three millions ! that is indeed a large amount. And it has been stolen ?”

“I am unable to say, as yet ; but I sincerely hope not. I am going to count the money as soon as Monsieur Dorgères comes in.”

Just at that moment the banker entered. “Good morning, colonel,” he said, hastily. “I am pleased to see you, the more so as it is an unexpected pleasure. My cashier, for some reason I don’t understand, has just sent for me.”

Vignory hastened toward his employer. “I fear we have met with a misfortune, sir,” he stammered.

“Respecting the safe, no doubt,” said the banker, with great coolness. “Let us see. Come in, colonel ; you are not *de trop*.”

He passed in first, and the cashier followed him. “On my arrival, I found everything as you see,” said Vignory.

“Impossible ! no one has a key except yourself and me.”

“My key has not left me, sir ; here it is.”

“And here is mine.”

“Then there is a third,” said the Russian, “for here it is in the lock.”

“True,” murmured M. Dorgères. “Who would have supposed it possible ? But it is strange we haven’t been robbed. I see the rolls of gold on the lower shelf. Vignory, where did you put the notes ?”

“In a portfolio, sir, there on the right.”

“What was the sum total that the safe contained yesterday ?”

“Three hundred and sixty-six thousand and eighty-nine francs, besides

the three millions received from the Bank of France, and which I placed in the middle drawer."

"See if they are still there," said the banker, with stoical firmness.

With a trembling hand, Vignory opened the steel drawer, which was isolated in such a manner as to preserve its contents in case the outer portion of the safe should be destroyed by fire. "Here they are!" he exclaimed, pointing to the ten packages of three hundred thousand francs each.

"Count them," said M. Dorgères.

Vignory obeyed. "There is not a single note missing," he exclaimed at last, with a sigh of relief.

"God be praised! I am not ruined. I should have been, or nearly so, had the thief taken those three millions, and I can't explain why he left them. Now, count the rest of the contents."

Vignory accomplished the work very quickly, for he had put everything in order himself only the evening before, and knew where everything ought to be. "The rolls are complete," he said at last. Next he turned to the portfolio. "The notes, too," he added, after a longer examination.

"Then nothing is missing?"

"Nothing, sir,—that is—"

"What? speak out."

Vignory turned perceptibly paler. "Nothing except fifty thousand francs which I had counted out to pay a draft that was to be presented this morning—and they have disappeared."

"A strange thief, who might have taken a fortune and who contents himself with a mere pittance," observed M. Borisoff.

"Strange, indeed," repeated the banker, "and I think his manner of proceeding will set us upon his track. But the injury done me is not sufficiently great to make me forget that you have no time to lose, sir. My cashier will give you the sum you desire, and the casket you deposited with me."

"The casket!" repeated Vignory, in evident trepidation.

"Yes, take it from the safe."

"It is no longer here," gasped the young cashier.

"What! the casket also? You must be mistaken. Why should any person have taken that casket and left the millions untouched?"

"I don't know, sir, but it has happened."

"Ah! I begin to understand," muttered the colonel.

"Then you would oblige me by explaining the mystery," observed the banker.

M. Borisoff was very pale, but he retained his self-possession. "My dear sir," he began, without any apparent emotion, "I might reasonably complain and ask why you have not guarded the deposit confided to you with greater care; but recriminations are useless, and I shall content myself with requesting you——"

"To reimburse you for the loss of the valuables contained in your casket," interrupted the banker. "I intend to do so, and I shall rely entirely upon your statement of their value. You are a man of honour—that is enough."

"I am greatly flattered by the compliment and deeply touched by your offer," said the Russian, with ironical politeness; "but allow me to remind you that my casket contained something more than securities. It con-

tained very important papers which it is not in your power to make good."

"I may, at least, try to discover the person who has stolen them," replied M. Dorgères, "and I shall find him, for I will set the police on his track. The scoundrel will probably try to sell the securities, and in that case will certainly be caught."

"I doubt it. The bonds are payable to bearer, and I have not kept the numbers."

"It is very annoying—excessively annoying; but I repeat, sir, that I intend to make good the entire loss. I ought not to have accepted this deposit; but having done so, I am responsible for it, and I wish——"

"Once more, sir, I must remind you that your generosity will not put me in possession of my papers. The rest matters little; I am rich enough to bear a loss of this kind without inconvenience. I claim nothing, and I will accept nothing. I only ask one thing, not to have the police mixed up in my affairs."

"What! you wish me to abstain from any effort to apprehend the thief?"

"No; but I don't care to have all Paris and Europe know that I have been robbed. If you make a complaint I shall be forced to appear in court, my ambassador will hear of the fact, and I am particularly anxious to avoid notoriety. I should prefer to act alone, or in concert with you, if you are disposed to assist me."

"Act, and in what way?"

"By first endeavouring to discover the object of this extraordinary robbery, and ascertaining who, among the persons we know, would have had an interest in committing it. An ordinary thief would not have been satisfied with carrying off my casket, when your safe was filled with gold."

"You forget that he also carried off fifty thousand francs."

"That is a mere detail. The thief probably needed this money to reach a foreign country, where he could safely dispose of the papers he had taken."

"I begin to believe it," murmured M. Dorgères.

"I am certain of it," the colonel answered. "I have enemies, sir, as is the case with all men who hold an official position and who have been charged with secret missions by their government. So I am forced to believe that this blow, though directed against you, was intended for me. Was any one aware you had received this deposit?"

"Only two persons besides myself," replied M. Dorgères, "my cashier here, and my secretary, the young man you saw yesterday."

"I recollect. He came in just as you were telling me that the casket and the money would be at my disposal this morning. I even noticed his pallor and his embarrassed manner."

"I had just informed him that I had no further need of his services here."

"Ah! then he is no longer with you?"

"He has not yet left my house, but he will probably do so in a few days."

"May I ask his name?"

"Robert de Carnoël."

"Carnoël! There was an *attaché* of that name at the French Embassy in St. Petersburg some years ago."

"This young man's father; he died ruined, but he had, I believe, some friends in Russia."

"Would it inconvenience you to introduce the young man to me?"

"Not in the least. I have not seen him to-day, as yet, but he lives in the house and must be there now. Vignory, do me the favour to go and find him."

"I hardly think he is there, sir," replied the young cashier. "He wrote to me last evening that he was about to leave Paris."

"Nonsense. He cannot have gone so soon. Go up to his room and bring him down."

Vignory hesitated. He was thinking of the strange farcwell letter he had received the evening before. "Will you allow me to remind you, sir," he began, "that it is half-past ten, and that the bank ought to have opened at ten o'clock. I took the responsibility of having the outer door locked to prevent any one from coming in, and it is unnecessary to let every one know——"

"That the safe has been broken into. You are quite right. The public and the clerks can wait until eleven o'clock. My house is too well known for this delay to cause any alarm. But go at once for Carnoël."

Vignory bowed and obeyed.

"You have perfect confidence in your cashier?" inquired the colonel.

"I am as sure of him as of myself," replied M. Dorgères. "So sure that I think of making him my partner some day."

"What sort of a life does he lead?"

"Moral and industrious. He thinks only of his work, and he visits no one."

"Oh, I am not accusing him. I am only striving to gain some information, since you enter into my views."

"Yes, I think with you that it would be better not to have this affair noised abroad. I don't mind the loss of fifty thousand francs, and you are much more interested than myself in the discovery of the culprit. My cashier is discretion itself, and you can count upon his silence. As for my secretary, I am sure that he is incapable of divulging the secret."

Just at that moment Vignory returned. "I have not found Robert," he stammered.

"Has he gone out? He will soon return, probably."

"He will not return, monsieur; he has left Paris. He went away last evening, at half-past eleven o'clock. Your porter saw him pass by with a bag in his hand. He left nearly all his clothing in his room."

"That departure resembles a flight," observed M. Borisoff.

"Yes," exclaimed M. Dorgères; "the scoundrel has fled after robbing me. But he cannot yet have crossed the frontier. I will give a description of him, and set the telegraph working. He shall be arrested."

"My dear sir," said the colonel, who had lost none of his marvellous coolness, "before coming to a decision I think it would be as well for you to calculate the consequences. We have just agreed that it would be better not to mix the police up in this affair. Besides, it is not certain that your secretary is guilty. Appearances are sometimes deceitful."

"Didn't you hear that he absconded just after the robbery was committed?"

"That we must first find out for a certainty. Your cashier can perhaps give you some information on this point."

"I only know one thing, sir," said Vignory, in dismay, "that last

evening, when I locked the safe, the contents were intact. A man sleeps in the outer office, and he must have returned at midnight as usual."

"At midnight!" exclaimed M. Dorgères. "Malicome doesn't return till midnight! I shall dismiss him at once. I certainly don't suspect him. He has been in my employ more than twenty years, and I have never had any reason to doubt his honesty, but all this is no excuse for his negligence; and you, Vignory, have acted very wrongly in not informing me that he neglected his duties."

"Since you are sure of this man," remarked the colonel, "the theft was evidently committed before he was at his post, and after the departure of your clerks."

"Between six o'clock and midnight, and my wretch of a secretary fled at half-past eleven."

"That is an indication, but not a proof. Could he have gained an entrance here?"

"He could have passed down an inner staircase, and through the passage leading to the outer office. He must have had a false key, unless he stole the one kept by the watchman."

"How about the safe key? Where could he have obtained that?"

M. Dorgères drew it from the lock and examined it carefully. "It is evidently new, and must have been made by a skilful workman. There is no flaw in it, and it must have been made from a model."

"For your secretary to furnish this model, he must have obtained possession of your own key or that of your cashier."

"And I have never given him mine," interrupted Vignory, eagerly, as if anxious to avail himself of the first opportunity to defend his suspected friend.

"Nor I mine," said the banker; "but on two or three occasions I have laid it on my desk, and Robert may have seen or touched it."

"But he would have had to take it away, and you would have missed it. But are you not obliged to have a word in order to open the safe?"

"Yes, I had forgotten that," exclaimed the banker. "Viguory, you must have told Robert this word."

"No, sir; I changed it only yesterday. No one knew it."

"No; not even I? Why did you change it without informing me?"

"I did not think of it," stammered Vignory.

"Let me see the word," the banker said, approaching the safe. The five letters were in place. He read his daughter's name, and quickly asked: "Pray, why did you choose this word?"

"I can't tell, sir. I took the first word that came into my head, for I was in a hurry."

"Did Robert come in after the change?"

"No, sir; that is to say, I changed the word on the night before last, and he came in yesterday morning to give me a note you had entrusted to him, but I don't think he stopped near the safe."

"You don't think so, but you are not sure. But I see that the two arms which ought to meet when any one tampers with the lock have failed to act. Now, Robert knew the secret. I have spoken to him at least a dozen times of this contrivance, which would infallibly seize the thief in the very act. He knew that it was only necessary to press a spring to prevent it from acting, and he took his precautions accordingly. Now I can doubt no longer. If he was not the thief, it must have been myself or you, Vignory, for no one else is acquainted with this arrangement."

This peremptory answer silenced the young cashier's attempts to vindicate his friend. It was evident that suspicion must rest either on Robert de Carnoël or on Jules Vignory.

There was but one way of escape ; to relate the story of the severed hand, confess that a previous attempt had been made to break the safe open, and prove that it certainly was not Robert who attempted the theft then, since he had not left M. Dorgère's drawing-room that evening. Still this did not satisfactorily establish Robert's innocence, for he might have accomplices ; and Vignory concluded that it was better to remain silent than to compromise himself uselessly. Besides, he could do nothing without consulting Maxime.

"I begin to think it was your secretary," said the colonel, who had listened attentively. "Now, what are we going to do? Are you very anxious to recover the money stolen from you?"

"Less anxious than you are to recover your casket. Still the scoundrel ought to be punished as he deserves."

"So I think, and if you will be guided by me, I will engage to find the thief for you. I am more and more anxious that your police should not be mixed up in the affair. I can manage it far better than they can. I am personally interested, and a man is never so well served as by himself. I only wish for some information respecting Monsieur de Carnoël. Whom did he visit in Paris?"

"No one ; during the two years he has acted as my secretary he has scarcely left the house. He has neither a family nor any estates. His father only left him a delapidated castle."

"Where?"

"In Brittany, near Quimper, I believe. But he has surely not gone there. He must have taken the midnight train for Le Havre and embarked for America in the morning."

"Unless he has fled to some other country ; Russia, for instance. I shall soon solve the mystery."

"I admire your confidence, sir, though I don't share it. I have decided to lodge no complaint against him. He has lived in my house, and it would be very unpleasant for me to send him before the assizes. So act as you think proper ; I abandon the case to you."

"Very well, sir, justice shall be done without scandal or publicity. You will not see me again until it has been accomplished. I shall not take away my casket since it has disappeared ; but fortunately you have only met with a slight loss, and I can draw the thirty thousand francs I came for."

"My cashier will hand you the amount. Now, allow me to leave you. My business requires my attention, and it is time to open the bank. The public has been kept waiting too long already. You hear me, Vignory? And, above all, not a word to any one."

The young man bowed silently. He was too much agitated to reply. M. Dorgères hastened away and went in search of his daughter. He found her in her own room engaged in writing. She looked pale, and her eyes were very red. "You have been crying," said her father, tenderly ; "what is the matter?"

"Yes. I have done nothing else since yesterday—and you are the cause of my grief."

Her father started. He had not expected such a frank confession, and he saw that the scene would be more painful than he had anticipated.

"You are angry with me because I have talked sense to you," he said gently. "On the contrary, you ought to thank me for opposing a marriage that would certainly make you wretched. But I don't ask so much. I only ask you to listen to me calmly, and then you will admit the impossibility of this marriage. It is Monsieur de Carnoël himself who has rendered it impossible."

Then, as Alice remained silent, he pointed to the unfinished letter lying upon the table, and asked: "To whom are you writing?"

"To him," replied Alice, without the slightest hesitation.

"What! you write to this man? And you don't even try to conceal the fact from me?"

"Why should I conceal it? I have promised to marry him, and I shall keep my word. I can certainly write to my betrothed."

"So you have engaged yourself without consulting me? And you think you will marry without my consent? You are mad! Are you aware that at your age a girl cannot dispense with her father's consent?—that the law forbids a minor to dispose of herself? Well, this consent I refuse. Do you hear?"

"I shall wait."

"Ah, this is too much!" the banker cried, crimson with anger. "So you dare to tell me to my face that you will marry against my will on the day you attain your majority? You defy me! Well, you shall be punished as you deserve. Do you know what this fine gentleman you call your lover has done? Why, he has stolen!"

"It is false!"

"He has stolen!" repeated M. Dorgères. "Yesterday I told him what I thought of his pretensions, and informed him that I intended to send him from the house. I offered him an opportunity to act as my representative in a foreign country, but he refused it."

"He was right."

"Allow me to finish. You may defend him after I have finished my story, if you have the courage. He refused the position I offered him; told me that he did not need my protection, and haughtily left my office. I have not seen him since, but he returned during the evening, and opened the safe with a false key. From it he took fifty thousand francs, and a casket belonging to Colonel Borisoff."

"You mean that he is accused of this infamous crime, but you do not believe him guilty of it! Question him; he will have no trouble in proving his innocence."

"He has fled—fled like the thief that he is—and he must have crossed the frontier ere now. I am well rid of the scoundrel. I hope he will never again set foot in France. If he returns you will be free to disgrace yourself by marrying him, for I shall not arrest him."

"Gone!" murmured the girl, overcome with despair—"gone without explaining the cause of his departure, without bidding me adieu!" And she fainted in her father's arms.

IV.

"WHERE are you leading me?" asked Jules Vignory of his friend Maxime, who had taken his arm upon meeting him on the boulevard, and was conducting him towards the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin. Several days had elapsed since the robbery, and Maxime had undoubtedly dined well, for

his colour was considerably heightened, and he was exceedingly fluent of speech.

"To a place of amusement where you have never set foot, I'm certain," he replied.

"I have no desire to be amused," said Jules; "what reason have I to rejoice?"

"Yes, I know—the severed hand, Colonel Borisoff's casket, and the fifty thousand francs. Well, what of it? My uncle doesn't suspect you of taking them, no more than he imagines that the trap attached to his safe amputated a woman's hand."

"That is precisely what troubles me. The silence you have compelled me to maintain weighs me down, especially now that poor Robert is accused of the theft."

"I fancy he's guilty; if he were not he wouldn't have decamped like that without warning any one. Besides, I think an ordinary thief would have taken all the money. This gentleman contents himself with a few thousand francs, which he stands greatly in need of, and which he hopes to return some day or another. As for the casket, what did it contain? The secrets of a woman, probably—of some woman who was in league with Carnoël. In that case, everything would be explained. She first endeavoured to operate herself, and failed: the attempt cost her her pretty hand. By the way, if the newspapers tell the truth, it is to be exhibited at the Morgue to-morrow. Having failed, she begged Carnoël to make the attempt. He knew how to prevent the arms from acting; he had just been dismissed by your uncle and had nothing more to lose, so he consented. He opened the safe, gave the casket to the interested person, and kept the money, which will give him a start in America or elsewhere."

"That is a mere romance, and a most improbable one. Robert had no *liaisons*."

"How do you know?"

"He was, and is still, in love with your cousin."

"That's no proof. He has only known her for two years, and before then he may have loved some other woman who still retained her influence over him."

"To a sufficient extent to induce him to dishonour himself to please her! Your supposition lacks common sense."

"Perhaps so. But tell me, will the Russian colonel be at my uncle's 'at home' to-morrow? I should like to get a look at him."

"He left the day after the casket was stolen."

"Where has he gone?"

"I don't know; but I suspect he has gone in search of Robert."

"So he wishes to play the detective too. I'm not surprised, however, for I think that is his business. I am of opinion that he is charged with some secret mission. Never mind; though I am only a *débutant*, I may overtake the thief first; and I shan't try to find Robert. I shall devote myself to a search for the one-handed woman. That is the surest, way."

"If you could discover her and vindicate poor Robert you would certainly perform a worthy action."

"Which would ruin all your hopes, however, for Alice would return to her first love. But this consideration shan't deter me. If I succeed in proving that Carnoël is innocent, I shall be delighted, and shall proclaim the fact everywhere; but if, on the contrary, I find that he was this

woman's accomplice, why so much the worse for him, and so much the better for you."

"And the bracelet! what have you done with it?"

"You would probably have thrown it into the Seine with the hand. But I showed it to my jeweller, who instantly recognised it as one which had been brought to him to be repaired about a month ago by a pretty young woman, who left neither her name nor address, but who called for it a week afterwards. He had never seen her before, though he has an extensive acquaintance with real or pretended ladies, and he thinks she had only recently arrived in Paris. Besides, as I told you, the bracelet is of foreign manufacture."

"You have kept it, I suppose?"

"Most certainly. First I put it in an *escritoire* with my money and papers; but I reflected that it might be stolen. It is easier to force open a rosewood writing-desk than a safe, and so I decided to wear it."

"On your arm? People will laugh at you."

"Oh, they can't see it unless I choose to show it; and even if they do I don't mind a little ridicule. They will say that I'm in love, and that the bracelet is a gift from my adored one, which I have sworn shall never leave me."

"All this doesn't explain where you are taking me."

"You have at least understood why I wear this ornament?"

"Not at all."

"What, you don't understand that I mean to seek the owner of this bracelet everywhere—at all the theatres, balls, and other places where women most do congregate?"

"You are certainly mad. After such an operation as that lady was subjected to last week, she can't be in a condition to frequent theatres and places of public amusement. She must be in bed, if she hasn't died from the effects of her wound."

"Oh, it isn't she I hope to find at the skating-rink this evening."

"At the rink! You surely do not mean to spend the evening there, and you don't imagine that I am going to accompany you?"

"I have no intention of taking you there by force," said Maxime, laughing. "It is a very amusing place, and you had better go there with me than go and shut yourself up at home at ten o'clock in the evening. But you have a perfect right to prefer your fireside to a reunion of pretty women. Besides, if my uncle learns that you frequent places of amusement he may tell his daughter, and this indiscretion may displease Alice. You are not thinking of Alice? But you ought to; I want you to become my cousin by marriage. So go home if you like; but I'm going to the rink, where I don't mean to waste my time; and as you are about to leave me, I will briefly explain my plan."

"I am curious to hear it, but I suspect that it is a very senseless one."

"Listen before deciding. I intend to exhibit this bracelet to all the young women I meet this evening. My acquaintance is extensive, and I shall very likely meet some one who will recognise it and express surprise at seeing it on my arm. Then we shall talk together, and I promise you that before we part she will tell me the name of its owner. Do you understand now?"

"Partly, but I must confess that I have no faith in your plan. Why, it would be the merest chance in the world if you met a friend of the person you are seeking."

"It is scarcely likely that I shall meet her the first time. I don't expect it, but I shall try again, and the oftener I repeat the experiment the greater will be my chance of success. Besides, if the owner of the ornament hears that I am wearing a turquoise and diamond bracelet, and all Paris will know it in a week, she will probably send an emissary, a female friend, who will try to make a conquest of me in order to obtain the bracelet, or at least to ascertain how it came into my possession. However, neither my uncle nor my little cousin must ever know what I am doing, unless I finally acquire proofs that your friend Carnoël is not implicated in the affair. In that case I should be obliged to satisfy them that he is as white as snow."

"I hope so, indeed, and you must keep me informed of your progress. You are engaging in an enterprise which is extremely perilous, it seems to me."

"I am no child, and I am not afraid. But it is terribly cold here, and I am eager to begin my campaign; so good-night."

Vignory pressed the hand that Maxime extended, and proceeded home while his friend hastened up the Rue Blanche. The brilliantly illuminated entrance of the skating-rink was visible in the distance; and the carriages which were approaching it formed a long line in the middle of the street. The outer vestibule was crowded. Maxime entered as if thoroughly at home; but he had scarcely done so when he felt some one touch his arm. He turned at once, but only saw the back of a lad, who instantly disappeared through the baize doors leading into the vestibule. This trifling incident was accepted by Maxime as a warning. "I must keep my eyes open here," he muttered; "for if some rascal stole the bracelet, I should be nicely sold."

The rink was crowded to overflowing, and Maxime, after elbowing his way through the crowd, finally reached the gallery leading to the concert-hall. His progress was not rapid, but he was in no hurry; and as he leisurely advanced he carefully scrutinised the promenaders he met and the various occupants of the side-boxes. Among the latter he speedily recognised three feminine acquaintances who were without escorts, and who were watching the new-comers and provincials as they filed by, and making fun of their costumes and appearance. Maxime, however, was one of their favourites, and as soon as they perceived him they favoured him with their most gracious smiles, and he needed no urging to join the party.

"Why do we never see you now?" asked a buxom blonde named Delphine and a brunette named Cora at the same time.

"Ah!" replied Maxime; "I have a confession to make: I am no longer to be seen anywhere, for I am in love."

"In love?"

"Desperately in love, my dears."

"It must be true," said the third member of the party, who was named Berthe. "He has a gift from his beloved one on his arm."

In the position Maxime had taken, his clasped hands resting on the edge of the box, the bracelet was distinctly visible. "How superb!" sneered Cora; "but the lady has given you an ugly present—the diamonds lack fire and the turquoises are very pale."

"That is the way with fashionable women," added Delphine; "they have no taste."

"It is evident that this one isn't young," Berthe chimed in. "My grandmother had a bracelet exactly like that one."

"You don't understand anything about it," murmured Maxime, trying to assume an aggrieved air; "this lady is a foreigner, and all her jewels are heirlooms."

"You don't impose upon us; I have an idea that I have seen this bracelet somewhere before."

"Indeed! You would do me a favour by telling me the name of the wearer."

"I have forgotten it, but it will come back to me some day," said Berthe. "You are laughing, and you evidently think I am romancing. You are wrong, my friend, and I will convince you one of these days that I know your princess."

Dorgères was about to protest, for he hoped that Berthe was not deceived, and that she would indeed be able to give him the desired information. But his investigation was fated to proceed no further for the time, as just then Delphine drawled: "Look, here comes the most agreeable of doctors."

Maxime turned and found himself face to face with a member of his club, a Hungarian physician, who understood games of every description, especially chess. He was considerably surprised at meeting this gentleman at the rink, and not a little vexed that he should interrupt the conversation just as it was beginning to become interesting. The foreigner scarcely looked like a physician, with his immense moustache and whiskers. One instinctively wondered, on looking at him, why his overcoat was not trimmed with military frogs, and why he had no spurs to his boots. Nevertheless, he was a genuine physician, with diplomas from several German and Polish universities. He had given up practice because he had plenty of money, but he never refused his services when called upon, and always gave his attentions without charge. Judging by the very warm manner in which he was received by the party that Maxime Dorgères had joined, he was altogether a popular character among the frequenters of the so-called "skating palace."

"How do you do, doctor? You have come to look after your patients, I suppose," cried Berthe. "That is very kind. Tell me a remedy for the headache."

M. Villagos, for such was the foreigner's name, began by shaking hands with Maxime, and, after exchanging a few bantering remarks with the others, he took young Dorgères aside, whispering: "Come, my dear sir, and let me show you a marvel."

It was the first time his manner had been so familiar, and the banker's nephew was on the point of politely excusing himself when he reflected that it would be easy for him to join the women a little later, so he consented to be led away. "A marvel?" he inquired. "What can it be?"

"I don't exaggerate. You will agree with me when you have seen the lady."

"Ah, so it is a lady you wish to show me," said Maxime; "so much the better. But I come here very often, and have already seen all the *habituées* of the place."

"And so have I; and if it were another Cora or Delphine, I should not have disturbed you."

As they talked they walked along until they reached a point where the promenade described a sudden turn, and the skating hall began. It was usually less frequented than the café, where you could swallow music with your beer.

At the rink of the Rne Blanche, now defunct, skating was only a pretext, an amusement imposed by the name of the establishment, and those who took part in it seemed to have been hired to glide over the asphalt which takes the place of the frozen waters of the lakes in the Bois de Boulogne. But few women engaged in the pastime, as a rule, and those few belonged to the lower classes. Maxime knew this, and so he was not a little surprised to see the doctor pause before the balustrade separating the promenade from the skating hall and say—"My dear sir, here you can see the marvel. She is down there just now, but will soon come by this way. Look at her closely when she passes and tell me what you think."

Maxime looked at the person who had excited the doctor's admiration, and saw in the distance a woman who was wheeling round on her skates with extraordinary skill. Others had also noticed her, and several groups had formed at the end of the promenade to watch her, for she executed the most difficult movements with the greatest ease and precision, and the applause bestowed upon her seemed to incite her to renewed efforts. But suddenly she changed her tactics, and abandoning circles and backward movements she darted forward in a straight line, leaving the spectators to await her return, and flying by Maxime with the rapidity of a bird. She was a tall and slight brunette, with large dark eyes that glittered like diamonds. She glanced at him as she passed, but before he had recovered from his surprise she was far away.

"Well, what do you say?" inquired M. Villagos.

"I admit that you are right," answered Maxime. "She is indeed a marvel, and I don't understand why I have never met her. It must be the first time she has come here. If she had shown herself anywhere in Paris before, she would have been noticed at once. Such an apparition as that is an event. What eyes she has, and what a figure! She sways to and fro like a reed, without an effort or a single ungraceful movement. I hope she will pass again."

"You seem inclined to admire my marvel more closely, my dear sir," said the doctor laughing, "and for fear of causing you constraint I will leave you. Shall you be at the club this evening?"

"Yes, yes, certainly, and I shall be delighted to meet you there. But tell me to what nationality does this unknown beauty belong? Is she a Spaniard, or an Italian, or a creole? She certainly isn't a Parisian."

"Who knows? There are many, yes, indeed, all types among your countrywomen. Still I am inclined to think that this lady is one of my compatriots. At Pesth there are many who resemble her, even among the ladies of rank. But the latter don't visit skating rinks."

"I don't take this one for a duchess, and to prove it I intend to accost her at once."

"Very well. Let me know the result of your adventure," said the Hungarian, shaking hands with Maxime, who made no effort to detain him.

In his admiration Maxime had forgotten the object of his visit, and even the bracelet he had upon his arm. Had his friend Vignory been present he would certainly have laughed to see him abandon his great enterprise to dog the steps of this queen of the rink. However, Maxime could not descend into the arena, where she was performing her evolutions, without exposing himself to the danger of disagreeable shocks, so it was necessary to wait until she had finished her exercise in order to speak to her. She was dressed in an elegant costume, designed expressly for the sport she was enjoying that evening. The *habituées* of the rink did

not usually go to so much expense to take their exercise. Maxime became more and more certain that she was a foreigner, and decided that he must observe certain forms in attempting to enter into conversation with her. He made his way towards the end of the hall where he knew she would remove her skates, as he did not wish to lose a moment after she had set foot on the promenade. Had she noticed him? He rather hoped so. More than once their eyes had met as she pursued her rapid evolutions.

"If I cannot speak to her, I intend to follow her to see where she lives," thought the banker's nephew. "To-morrow I will call on Berthe Verrier and resume the conversation that Monsieur Villagos interrupted."

These reflections occupied him until he gained a position near the door leading towards the Rue de Clichy, and through which the skaters usually passed out. He had not been there many minutes when he heard a shrill voice behind him say, "Good-evening, Monsieur Maxime."

"What! you again?" he exclaimed, on perceiving Georget, his uncle's page, whom he little expected to meet. "What the devil are you doing here?"

"Oh, I come every evening," replied the lad, quite unabashed.

"At your age! My uncle really ought to know the life you are leading. I shan't tell him, however, for he would dismiss you; but I shall tell Monsieur Vignory, who will take you in hand."

"Why, I am doing no harm; besides, I come on my grandmother's account. You needn't laugh, Monsieur Maxime; it's true. My grandmother is poor, and she has only me to help her. Here I earn my forty sous, and sometimes three francs a night by doing errands, and Monsieur Dorgères only gives me twenty-five francs a month. Upon my word of honour that's all. Ask Monsieur Jules."

"Well, I will make him increase it."

"Oh, how pleased my grandmother will be! She likes her coffee and milk every morning."

"She shall have it. But clear out, and don't attempt to speak or even to bow to me this evening."

"Agreed. Monsieur Maxime, if you ever need any one to jump into the fire or into the water for you, give me the preference."

After uttering this *naïve* protestation of devotion, Georget disappeared. Glancing again at the fair stranger, Maxime saw that she had summoned one of the attendants to remove her skates, and he at once prepared for the attack. Stationing himself at the top of the short flight of steps that led down into the arena, he waited for her to pass him; as she did so, he said, in a tone appropriate to the circumstances: "Madame, you will certainly pardon me if I ask you to help me in winning a wager."

The lovely brunette seemed neither shocked nor even astonished by this beginning. "What wager?" she quietly asked.

"On seeing you skate, I made a bet that you were a Hollander, a Russian, or a Swede, against a friend who maintained that a woman of northern origin could not have eyes like yours, and that you must be an Andalusian."

"Your friend is mistaken."

"I was sure of it. How could you have become such a skilful skater had you been born on the banks of the Guadalquivir, which never freezes. Well, I bet ten louis, and you have just made me the winner."

"No, you have lost, for I am a Parisian, born at Batignolles."

"Then you are certainly going to tell me that your name is Charlotte or Rosalie?"

"My name is Justine."

"You are certainly mocking me."

"It is you who are mocking me by subjecting me to such a cross-examination, and I really am very foolish to reply."

"But why should you not answer my questions? You certainly can't be offended because I find you adorable. I made this an excuse to tell you so. Where is the harm?"

"Oh, I am not angry. I like compliments; but I am honest, and I warn you that I take them for what they are worth. However, I thank you, and now I am going home."

"Very well. I shall accompany you."

"Not with my permission."

"That will not prevent me from following you."

"I must tell you that you are on the wrong track. It has pleased me to engage in a diversion of which I am extremely fond, and to chat a little with a well-bred man; but it will please me still more to return home alone, and I hope that you will not displease me."

"It would be useless for me to make such a promise, for I should follow you in spite of myself; and, if you closed your door against me, I should be quite capable of spending the night under your window, and giving you a serenade like a Spanish student."

This extravagant threat brought a smile to the lips of the lovely brunette, who replied, after a little reflection: "You really are a dangerous man, and I see that you will compromise me if I persist in my refusal. The best way to rid myself of you is evidently to yield. So I will allow you to accompany me under certain conditions. First, that we go on foot. It is a pleasant night, and I don't live so far from here. Then, too, you must leave me a short distance from the house I live in, and you will only attempt to see me again with my permission."

"Agreed," Maxime replied, offering his arm, which was unhesitatingly accepted.

"If you insist upon walking, you must act as a guide," he remarked, when they reached the open air.

"Let us take the Rue de Tivoli, if you please."

Maxime secretly wondered where this nocturnal promenade would end; whether at some superb mansion on the Boulevard Malesherbes, or at a modest house in the Rue Mosnier. However, on leaving the Rue de Tivoli, his companion made him cross the Rue d'Amsterdam, and enter the Rue de Londres. It was now nearly midnight, and at such an hour these streets are nearly deserted, so that lovers can talk there without danger of being overheard. And yet after a few moments the conversation came to a sudden standstill. Maxime was reflecting on the strangeness of the adventure, and felt a desire to study the ground a little before advancing too far. His companion, rather to his surprise, passed the Rue Mosnier without entering it, and led him on across the broad bridge, known as the Place de l'Europe. There, leaning over the parapet, stood three men, who seemed to be watching the movements of a locomotive on the rails below with great interest, and who turned just as the two pedestrians passed them.

"Wouldn't you have been afraid of these men if you had returned alone?" Maxime inquired, in view of renewing the conversation.

"No, for I should have taken a cab," his companion quietly replied. "I am not a coward, but the neighbourhood is rather lonely at night."

"Where do you live? you can certainly tell me, since we are going there."

"In the Rue Joffroy. It is a long walk, and I should have warned you if I had not wished to impose this penance upon you, to teach you never to insist upon escorting a lady without knowing where she is going."

"It's a delightful penance, and I'm sorry you don't live farther."

"More compliments! Well, since you are incorrigible, I do not see why I, too, may not be a trifle indiscreet. May I ask if you wear a coat of mail, like the warriors of the middle-ages? I feel something hard under my hand, which hurts me even through my glove."

Maxime had momentarily forgotten the singular ornament he was wearing upon his arm, and the lady reminded him of it in the most unforeseen manner. Still he saw no reason why he should conceal the truth, and he even took a sort of pleasure in replying: "It is a bracelet."

"A love token! Well, I like you all the better for it."

"You thought me incapable of loving, perhaps?"

"Not exactly; but I didn't think you were sentimental."

"I will convince you to the contrary when you will allow me. But haven't I proved it already?"

Their walk was drawing to a close, and Maxime had not much time to lose if the adventure was not to end at his companion's door. "You speak of confidence," said he; "show me, then, that you do not distrust me by telling me who you are."

"It seems to me you are the one to begin," retorted his companion.

"I don't even know your name."

"You told me yours was Justine, and mine is Maxime. Is this exchange of Christian names sufficient?"

"I understand. Before telling me your family name you wish to know mine. It isn't aristocratic by any means, I warn you. My name is Sergent—Justine Sergent. And yours?"

"Maxime Dorgères, No. 99 Rue de Châteaudun; age twenty-five, not without means, unmarried, independent, of excellent character."

"Oh, enough! In response to such a complete description I should be obliged to tell you a great deal that would not interest you in the least."

"Everything connected with you interests me."

"To the extent of making you forget the person who holds you captive with that bracelet?"

"Why not?"

"That is the way with men—ever ready to deny the absent to the one who is present, and to deceive the one who has inspired them with a passing fancy. You love her, or at least you have loved her, and you scarcely know me; so I don't think you mean a single word that you say."

"I swear that I am not deceiving you, and that I am bound to no one."

"I should like to put your sincerity to the test. Suppose I asked you for this bracelet, would you give it to me?"

This question fell on Maxime's ardour like a bucket of ice-water. To give away the bracelet was to renounce all hope of finding the woman who had lost her hand, and his heart was too earnestly enlisted in this enterprise to abandon it. Besides, the proposal was rather too brusque, and he

again began to suspect his companion, who might only be an adventuress. They were now near one of the candelabra that light the Avenue de Villiers, and the belle of the rink perhaps read on her escort's face a doubt that wounded her, for she resumed rather drily: "Spare yourself the trouble of refusing; I only wished to test you. I ought to have remembered that this ornament is perhaps very costly, and that men never hesitate to attribute mercenary motives to a woman."

"I assure you that such an idea never once occurred to me," protested Maxime eagerly, considerably impressed by this straightforward and dignified language, "and if this bracelet were not a family relic——"

"Pray say no more about it; but since you persisted in accompanying me, come with me to the end. I confess that I should not be very comfortable if I were obliged to go the rest of the way alone. I have never been out on foot so late before, and I did not know that these streets were so deserted."

"Have no fears," said Maxime, trying to atone by his politeness for the unfavourable impression his hesitation had produced. "I have not the slightest intention of leaving you; besides, there is no danger whatever."

"You will laugh at me, perhaps, but since we left the boulevard it seems to me that some one is following us."

Maxime turned, but seeing no one he gaily replied—"I wish an opportunity to defend you would present itself, but unfortunately I think you will not be attacked. Will you take my arm again?"

"No, thank you. Your bracelet hurts me."

"You certainly have that bracelet on your mind. You wouldn't give it so much thought if you knew why I set such store by it."

"I don't care to know."

"No more than you care to see me again. In five minutes you will bid me good-night, and all will be over. My romance will end with the first page."

"The shortest stories are always the best. But it seems to me that this place is badly chosen for an argument, and I fancy I hear footsteps approaching; let us hasten on."

Maxime was beginning to think that his companion was taking him a long distance. The surroundings were not familiar to him, and he wondered how this sentimental journey would terminate. The prospect of returning on foot was anything but pleasing, and he had little hope of finding a cab. "This is an adventure which I certainly shan't care to relate to Dr. Villagos," he thought, rather discontentedly. "If I were sensible I should own myself worsted, and never make any attempt to see this woman again. But then she is so confoundedly pretty."

"We have arrived safely at last," murmured the fair stranger, shortly afterwards. "This is the street I live in, and there now only remains for me to thank you for your escort. You have rendered me a real service; for this evening, ridiculous as it may appear, I was really afraid."

"You certainly won't forbid me to accompany you to your door?"

The stranger hesitated an instant, and then replied: "It would be ungracious on my part to do so, after bringing you so far. Come."

Maxime followed her. She finally paused before the first of a row of large houses, recently built, and placed a small key in the lock of a side door.

"Is this the way I am to come in when you do me the honour to receive me?"

"I have not said that I would receive you," she replied, quickly.

"No; but I hope you will not drive me to desperation by refusing to do so to-morrow."

"To-morrow you would not find me, for I shall leave Paris in the morning."

"For ever?"

"No; only for a fortnight."

"That is a long time; but I can be content to wait if you will promise me that on your return——"

"When I return I shall be forgotten, and if I am not, it would be better for you to make no attempt to see me."

"I shall not follow your advice."

"You will be sorry if you don't. But I can't prevent you from running after an illusion, and if you are determined to come, do so, but not until a fortnight has elapsed, and when you do, enter through the gateway."

"For whom shall I ask?"

"Madame Sergeant. That is my name, as you know. Good evening, sir." The young man had not time to insist, for his companion had turned the key, and in another second had vanished.

Thus summarily dismissed, Maxime was reduced to examining the abode of the fair unknown. It consisted of two stories in addition to the basement, and had a garden in the rear. While engaged in this examination a slight sound attracted his attention—a sound of footsteps coming up the street. He turned, and distinctly saw the three men he had passed on the Place de l'Europe. He also fancied that he saw another form advancing towards him, but keeping in the shadow of the walls. Maxime suddenly recollected that it was past midnight; that the inhabitants of this elegant, though quiet neighbourhood, retired early; that he could expect no help if he was attacked, and that he was unarmed. These men were evidently watching him, and probably not with the best of intentions.

"Can it be that the beauty brought me here so that I might fall into a trap?" he thought. "It would be no laughing matter. I shouldn't mind the loss of the little money I have about me, but I should be profoundly annoyed to be robbed of my bracelet. After all, I am perhaps mistaken, and they are not coming this way. They don't seem to advance, still it seems to me that I can distinguish some one creeping along in the shadow. They have sent him to reconnoitre, perhaps."

Maxime was naturally brave, and these reflections determined him to put an end to this painful uncertainty, so that he advanced to meet the person who was stealthily approaching; he had not taken three steps, however, when he heard these words uttered in a low tone: "Don't stir, Monsieur Maxime. It is I."

"Who are you?" he asked, greatly surprised to hear himself called by his name. There was no answer, but the next instant he caught sight of a triple row of metal buttons flashing brightly in the light of a street lamp, and of a face which he recognised at once. "Georget!" he exclaimed, "right under my feet as usual."

"Not so loud, sir; they are watching for you. I heard them talking as I walked along behind them. They are fellows who think no more of robbing a passer-by, and killing him if need be, than they would of drinking a glass of absinthe. I know them by sight. They prowl around the Barrière de Courcelles all day, and that is where I spend my Sundays."

"Bah ! if they intended to attack me they would have done it by this time, and you see they don't move."

"Because this street is too thickly inhabited. If they attempted the job here, you would only have to call for help, or ring a door-bell, while down on the Avenue de Villiers there are not so many houses. That is why they are lying in wait for you there."

"But what am I to do ? I have no desire to spend the night here, and if I turn and go the other way they will run after me."

"They will follow you, but they won't molest you while I am with you."

"Do you fancy they would be afraid of a gnat like you ?"

"No, but they might be afraid that if they came too near I should rush off to a café not far from here, which is kept open until two o'clock in the morning. I have friends there ; besides, I know almost every one about here. I live in the neighbourhood."

"Then perhaps you know to whom this house belongs ?"

"No ; but I'll ask and tell you to-morrow, if you like. But let us go now, it is quite time."

Maxime thought the lad was right. "Very well," he replied ; "we will see what those rascals intend to do. Go on." Georget did not need a second order, but stepped out. Maxime, however, could not make up his mind to depart without another glance at the fair stranger's residence. "Her room doesn't overlook the street," he thought. "If it did I should see a light, and all is dark." His adventure had evidently made a deep impression upon him, since it was able to make him forget the danger he was threatened by.

"I thought so," exclaimed Georget, suddenly ; "they have quickened their pace, but they keep at a distance."

Maxime turned and saw that the three men were indeed walking up the Rue Jouffroy. This cautious way of following a man they intended to rob struck Maxime as very singular, but everything that happened that night seemed strange to him. "I begin to think that these rascals wish to choose their ground," he said.

"That is exactly what I told you, Monsieur Maxime, but we have only one dangerous place to pass. We will take the Boulevard Malesherbes, and we shall soon reach the Rue Cardinet. The café where I have friends is at the corner, and my grandmother stays a little further on."

"Do you live with her ?"

"Yes, sir ; my grandmother is the concierge, and I sleep in the attic, so if you like you can go in and wait until I find a cab."

"That is a good idea, only your grandmother must have gone to bed before now."

"No danger of that ; she always waits for me. She must be getting uneasy, too, for I'm seldom out so late. I leave the rink at half-past eleven exactly every evening, and am at home twenty minutes afterwards. But to-night I was just leaving when you came out with a lady. You passed me without seeing me and went along the Rue de Tivoli. This is the way I always go—"

"Do you know the lady who was with me ?"

"I didn't look at her closely, but I don't think that I know her. But to finish my story ; when you crossed the Place de l'Europe, the three men who were there began to follow you, which seemed to me very strange. Then I quickened my pace, and got close behind them without their

knowing it, and I heard one of them say : 'We must wait until he is alone ; we can collar him as he comes back.'"

"Why didn't you warn me?"

"I wanted to, but I did not dare on account of the lady. I knew, too, that they wouldn't harm you while she was with you. But here we are at the boulevard ! Let us make haste towards the Rue Cardinet, for it seems to me they are almost at our heels."

They started on a run, and suddenly Maxime asked : "Do you hear that ? I believe they are running after us."

"I predicted it," replied the boy, "but I'm no longer afraid."

"But they seem to be gaining upon us ! See, they have reached the boulevard !"

"Have no fears. They will stop now. Do you see those two lanterns ahead of us ? It is a cab, and empty, too, for it's moving slowly. Here, driver, five francs above the regular fare !"

At this cry, the cabman whipped up his horse and brought it to the edge of the pavement in the twinkling of an eye. Georget at once opened the door. "Get in with me," said Maxime. "I am not going to leave you to face those rascals alone."

"Don't be uneasy, they won't molest me. And see, they are going back ; they know it's useless to attempt to follow us further. Are you going home ?"

"Yes, Rue de Châteaudun, No. 99. Do you hear, driver ? Good night, and thank you, my boy," exclaimed Maxime, leaping into the vehicle. "You have done me a great service, and I shall remember it, for I have had a fortunate escape."

"And the bracelet also," he added in a whisper.

V

M. DORGÈRE'S little Wednesday evening "at homes" were never very brilliant ; some old friends of the banker, with their wives and daughters, composing nearly all the guests at these weekly entertainments, though, from time to time, two or three gentlemen connected with the financial world would drop in, attracted by the charms of Mademoiselle Dorgères, and, above all, by her dowry. Moreover, Robert de Carnoël had never absented himself, and Jules Vignory was usually there ; but now Robert had disappeared, and it seemed as if he had taken with him the charm of these informal gatherings which he had been the life of.

Alice had lost her cheerfulness ; her father was gloomy and pre-occupied ; Vignory more serious and thoughtful than ever. Maxime alone had not changed ; but Maxime was not present when the banker's seven or eight guests entered the drawing-room after dinner, on the evening following the adventure at the skating rink. The young cashier had been invited to dinner by his employer, and a seat beside Alice had been assigned him. It was the first time this had happened, and he did his best to justify the favour ; but he was naturally timid, and the memory of his unfortunate friend rose between him and the charming young girl he was longing to please, so that the conversation naturally flagged a little. The father, who wished him well, tried to make him appear to advantage by questioning him upon matters with which he was thoroughly conversant, but financial questions had no interest for Alice, and these

efforts were unsuccessful. The governess, albeit a respectable and highly-educated widow lady, lacked vivacity and wit, and brought no enlivening element into this gathering of serious people. The other guests were after the same pattern, merchants who had accumulated a large fortune, but who had never had time to learn how to talk. They spoke of business, and their wives talked dress. The least wearisome was a certain M. Camaret, who had travelled a good deal, and could relate many tolerably amusing stories of life in South America and Cochín-China.

As for M. Dorgères he was very worried that evening about his daughter, for he saw that she was wounded to the heart. Besides, although he would not confess it to himself, he missed his secretary. Robert de Carnoël was a favourite with the entire household, and his sudden departure had thrown a veil of gloom over the mansion. M. Dorgères struggled against this regret, for he was firmly convinced that the absconder had been guilty of a heinous crime; but there were moments when a feeling of compassion seized him, and when he almost reproached himself for having driven the young man to crime by his harsh refusal. Hence he did not regret that he had refrained from denouncing him to the police, and secretly hoped that he would escape from this Russian grandee, who inspired him with little sympathy.

Under these circumstances it was a relief to every one when they went into the drawing-room for coffee. This was always served by Mademoiselle Dorgères. The ladies had gathered around the fireplace, the gentlemen talked politics with M. Dorgères, and Vignory, ashamed of his stupidity at table, kept himself gloomily aloof from the rest of the company. When he saw Alice approach with a cup in her hand, he almost shuddered, fearing he might again be guilty of a blunder. But instead of inquiring if he wished two lumps of sugar or only one, she began to speak of Carnoël. "Is it true that he hasn't written to you?" she began.

The young cashier turned pale as he stammered: "No, mademoiselle—at least not since he went away. Still, on the evening of his departure, he sent me a letter; a few words of farewell."

"Did he tell you where he was going?"

"No; but he promised I should hear from him."

"And he hasn't kept his promise. He is dead, is he not?" she asked, in a husky voice.

"Dead! oh, that would be terrible!" murmured Vignory, almost as deeply moved. "But I cannot believe it. The last time I saw him he swore that he would not kill himself. He said that suicide was a cowardly act."

"Suicide! he had thought of killing himself?"

"Alas, yes. He was desperate. He had just had a conversation with Monsieur Dorgères——"

"Who had forbidden him to think of marrying me. He told you that, did he not?" Vignory hesitated. This unexpected examination embarrassed him. "He must certainly have spoken to you of me," insisted Alice. "Answer, if you please."

"You place me in a very embarrassing position, mademoiselle," muttered Vignory. "I fear to pain you by telling you that Robert believed that you approved of your father's decision."

"In other words, he believed that I no longer loved him, that I had broken my promise to him, and that is why he went away without seeing me again?" Vignory made an affirmative gesture. "I thank you for

your frankness," continued Alice, earnestly. "Do you believe Monsieur Carnôel guilty of the crime of which he is accused?"

"No ! a thousand times no !" replied the young cashier. "Robert is not, cannot be a thief. There is a mystery about this affair which the future will solve, I'm sure. The true culprit will be discovered, and then——"

"Will you aid me in discovering him?"

"Will I? Ah ! mademoiselle, make use of me in any way. I should be only too happy to serve you, and I ask nothing better than to prove the innocence of my best friend."

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I had a prejudice against you, but you have dispelled it with a word, and from this time forward we are fast friends united in one purpose. You are my ally, and I beg you to rely upon my warmest friendship."

"What are you two young people plotting there?" cried the banker, rubbing his hands complacently, for he was delighted to see his daughter on such friendly terms with the husband he intended for her.

"Monsieur Maxime Dorgères," announced a footman at this moment.

Maxime's arrival always produced a favourable effect, for he invariably brought with him a goodly store of gaiety and gossip, which provided the guests with topics of conversation for an entire week. Alice also liked her cousin, though he sometimes shocked her a little, but she forgave the levity of his conversation and conduct, knowing that he was really good at heart. She smiled on him, and even M. Dorgères did the same. "Here you are, scapegrace !" said the banker. "By what chance do you come in such good time?"

"My dear uncle, I felt such remorse for my failure to appear last Wednesday that I was in haste to make my apologies."

"I know you, you righteous Pharisee ! Confess, rather, that you had nothing better to do to-day."

"I beg your pardon. I had a box at the Variétés."

"And you gave it up? How commendable ! nothing will astound me in future. Even if I were told that you had reformed and intended to settle down to work, I should perhaps believe it."

"But I lead the most methodical and industrious life in the world. I rise and retire every day at the same hour."

"Yes, you go to bed at daybreak and rise at noon."

"And I never have a moment to myself."

"I suppose not, with your clubs, and races, and theatres, to say nothing of all the rest. You wouldn't dare to give me an account of one day's proceedings."

"Upon my word, if I told you what I did yesterday, you would say I deserved a prize for good conduct. I spent the afternoon at home, reading a solid book. I dined alone, and spent the rest of the evening walking about."

"On the boulevards, probably?"

"No. I felt the need of walking for my health, so I explored some of the out-of-the-way localities. But guess what happened to me. I risked being murdered."

"So you wander about the streets picking up quarrels now ! Is this your boasted wisdom?"

"You are mistaken. I was followed by some scoundrels who wished to rob me, and if Providence had not sent your little Georget to my assistance, I should have had a hard time of it."

"You are jesting. Of what possible use could this lad have been to you?"

"He warned me that the scoundrels were following me, showed me a way to elude them, and finally stopped a cab for me. It is an incontestable fact that Georget saved my life. So I hope that you will grant him an increase of salary."

"But your story seems scarcely plausible. At what time did all this occur?"

"A little after midnight."

"And so Georget runs about the streets after midnight, does he? I have a great mind to dismiss him."

"If you do I shall take him into my service. Besides, he was not running about the streets; he was returning to his grandmother, who lives in the Rue Cardinet. I met him in the Rue Joffroy."

"I know that neighborhood very well. One of my friends has recently built three houses there, which he has let or sold. An excellent investment. If you employed some of your funds in the same way, I should think you were coming to your senses at last. But you won't succeed in convincing me that you were molested there. The Rue Joffroy is lined with houses, and much frequented."

"Still, it is true that I had a very narrow escape last night, and that your page did me a great service."

"I second my cousin's petition," said Alice. "The boy seems so pleasant and intelligent."

"All of which doesn't prevent him from performing his duties badly. What does Vignory say?"

"I have no cause to complain of him," declared the young cashier, who was not inclined to find fault with any *protégé* of Mademoiselle Dorgères.

"Well," said the banker to Maxime, "even if the scamp did play me a trick it would be only what I deserve, for I took him upon a recommendation which ought not to have had much weight. It was that of a lady whom you must certainly know by sight even if you don't visit her, for she entertains all Paris, and is said to have a decided preference for young men of your stamp—the Countess Yalta."

"The lady who owns that magnificent mansion in the Avenue Friedland?"

"People tell wonderful stories about the life she leads," remarked M. Camaret, who had approached. "They say she runs about the streets at night dressed like a man; that she loses fabulous sums at cards, and fences very skilfully. You need not laugh. This isn't the first time a woman has been known to brandish a sword. At Monte Video, I remember"—

"Is it true, Monsieur Maxime," inquired an elderly lady, "that she bathes in a gold bath set with jewels?"

"I am inclined to think people exaggerate," was the laughing reply. "A friend who visits there assures me that there are no jewels about the bath, but it is a fact that the countess is fabulously rich."

"She has a large amount deposited with me," remarked the banker, "and that was how she happened to ask me to take Georget into my employ. I suggested she should take him into her own service, but she replied that her stay in Paris was only transient, and that the boy could not accompany her abroad on account of his aged grandmother. The reason did not seem to me a very good one, but I granted her request."

"But why does she take an interest in him?"

"Oh, she told me a long story about the lad's father. It seems that he was a sergeant of Zouaves in the Crimean war, and, being taken prisoner, was carried off to a village which belonged to the countess's father. It happened that this sergeant, during his captivity, saved the life of Madame Yalta's father in a bear-hunt. The nobleman rewarded him handsomely, and on returning to Paris, at the close of the war, he left the service to enter a banking house. Afterwards he married, and finally died, leaving a widow, who did not long survive him, and this boy Georget. The manager of the bank gave the father the best possible recommendation, and it was this that decided me to take the lad, for I did not place much dependence on the assurances of the countess."

"Is the lady pretty?" inquired the governess.

"She is an ethereal blonde, with a *papier-maché* complexion, and a waist that could be spanned by one's two hands," replied M. Camaret. "I have often seen her driving a team in the Champs Élysées. She isn't my style; she looks like a snow-woman. Give me the beauties of tropical countries. In India, now——"

"Is she married?" interrupted the governess, Madame Martineau, who always dreaded these Indian stories.

"She is a widow, and consequently mistress of herself and her fortune," replied the banker. "She has just gone away for a fortnight. Last week she sent her steward for fifty thousand francs, which she said she needed for a little trip to Monaco or Nice."

"It is astonishing how ladies travel about nowadays," said Maxime. "One would think that all the prettiest women had agreed to leave Paris at the same time."

"One would suppose you were mourning for an absent sweetheart," remarked M. Camaret.

"I? Not at all. I am as free as air, and haven't the slightest desire to lose my liberty."

"Then take care. They say the countess turns all heads. I'm sure I don't know why, for she is so thin——"

"Alice, my child, won't you play us a waltz?" interposed Madame Martineau. "'The Wave,' say. That's my favourite."

Alice complied without the least hesitation, though this waltz awakened many sorrowful memories. It was the last piece she had played for Robert de Carnoël, who never wearied of listening to it. M. Dorgères, who knew that the waltz would remind his daughter of his secretary, inwardly cursed Madame Martineau's stupidity, and was greatly surprised to see Alice walk unhesitatingly to the piano which stood at the end of the room. "Can you read music?" she inquired, as she passed the young cashier.

He was greatly surprised by this question, for Mademoiselle Dorgères knew him well enough to be certain on the point, but he was obliged to admit that he did not know a single note.

"Then my cousin will turn the pages. It shall be his punishment for failing to appear last Wednesday evening."

"A pleasant punishment," exclaimed Maxime, who was competent to perform the desired service, as he knew a little of everything.

Thus Alice and Maxime found themselves virtually alone together, with nothing to prevent a free exchange of remarks, even while they were fulfilling their obligations to society. "Maxime, I want to speak to you

seriously," began Alice, in a low tone, while they were searching the portfolio for the desired waltz.

"All right," responded Maxime in the same tone. "I begin to understand why you called my services into requisition."

"You are an intimate friend of Monsieur Vignory?"

"The most intimate friend he has."

"Then you can tell me if I can trust him?"

"What do you mean by such a question?"

"I wish to know if Monsieur Vignory is a man to defend an unfortunate friend."

"Yes. I would trust him as implicitly as I would myself in such a case."

"Thank you. I have found the waltz, and I must play it; but by playing rather loud we can converse without being overheard. Now, can I depend upon Monsieur Vignory's assistance in proving that Monsieur de Carnoël is innocent?"

"Innocent! Do you believe him innocent?"

"Do you doubt it?" asked the girl quickly.

"You embarrass me a little," said Maxime; "and if you desire me to reply frankly, begin by being frank yourself. Do you love Monsieur de Carnoël?"

"Yes, I love him," replied Alice, unhesitatingly. "I love him more than ever since he has been unjustly accused, and I shall never love any one else."

"That is a straightforward confession. I thank you for your confidence, and I am going to tell you exactly what I think of the situation. But play a little louder. I fear some one may overhear our conversation."

Mademoiselle Dorgères followed his advice, and struck a few vigorous chords.

"In the first place," Maxime continued, "I must tell you that I have nothing to say against Monsieur de Carnoël. I knew him only slightly, but I have always considered him a very honourable man. Besides, Vignory, who knew him intimately, had an excellent opinion of him."

"He just told me that he was ready to defend him against his accusers."

"Against your father and others! It is very generous on Vignory's part, you must admit. You have not yet learned to appreciate him, but you will soon do so, for he is an excellent fellow."

"I am very grateful to him for consenting to be my ally."

"Then you wish to undertake the task of exculpating Monsieur de Carnoël. I assure you that you will find it no easy matter."

"What of that? Monsieur de Carnoël's honour is also mine, since we are betrothed."

"What! You would marry him even now?"

"Yes, I would and shall."

Maxime could not conceal a movement of surprise, and he gazed with no little admiration at this courageous young girl, who did not despair of accomplishing an almost impossible feat. He had never imagined that she was endowed with such strength of character and will. "The marriage you are dreaming of is an impossibility," he said. "Monsieur de Carnoël is now on his way to America or the Antipodes, and he will never return to France."

"I am certain that he has not left Paris," replied Alice, firmly. "He cannot have gone without making any effort to see me again. He has been

deceived. He was made to believe that I had broken a solemn promise, and, in a moment of anger, he left the house, but he is still in Paris."

"In that case, my dear Alice, you must allow me to say that it is unpardonable in him to conceal himself, instead of coming forward and proving his innocence."

"You forget that he may not know he is accused."

"You are right. How could he know? My uncle has made no complaint. No one knows of the robbery except your father, my friend Vignory, the Russian, and ourselves. I had not thought of that before."

"But now that you admit it, don't you understand that Monsieur de Carnoël's absence does not necessarily prove his guilt?"

"You are certain he has not left Paris, you say. Well, his position is most unfortunate, and the mystery ought to be cleared up. If you will authorise me to do so, I will gladly set to work to find him."

"Will you really? Will you become my ally as well?"

"With all my heart, my dear Alice. I was so before, though without your knowledge."

"What do you mean?"

"I should like to explain, but I must warn you that your waltz is nearly ended, and more talking is out of the question. I have just turned the last leaf."

"I am going to begin again. No one will notice it."

"Your father has started off on his favourite theories, to which his companions are listening respectfully; Monsieur Camaret is telling the ladies about his travels through the Argentine Republic; Vignory is watching us out of the corner of his eye, but he won't move as long as your father is talking. You can repeat the waltz while I tell you how this affair strikes me. To begin with, you know that only fifty thousand francs were taken from the safe when three or four millions were within reach. This is against Monsieur de Carnoël. An ordinary thief would have taken all the money."

"Yes, I believe that the safe was not opened by an ordinary thief. But is that any reason for condemning Monsieur de Carnoël?"

"No, but to clear him we must first of all ascertain the object of the robbery. Now, with these fifty thousand francs the thief took a certain casket belonging to Colonel Borisoff, and which must have contained something more than securities or titles of nobility."

"That is precisely what exculpates Monsieur de Carnoël. What interest could he possibly have in obtaining possession of the secrets of a foreigner whom he didn't know?"

"Very well reasoned, my dear cousin. But Vignory, who was present when the theft was discovered, told me that Borisoff remarked to my uncle that Monsieur de Carnoël's father belonged to the French embassy at St. Petersburg for a long time. He added that the son had probably kept up some connection with Russia. In short, he insinuated that Robert might have acted at the instigation of a Russian, some enemy of his. He thinks, too, that Robert merely took the money to defray his travelling expenses."

"How absurd! He imagines this because he doesn't like Monsieur de Carnoël."

"But why should he dislike him? He scarcely knows him."

"He has met him two or three times; he has guessed that we love each other, and as he has tried to pay his addresses to me himself——"

"He accuses his rival through jealousy. That is very possible. You of course know that he is doing his best to find Robert?"

"My father did not tell me so."

"But it is the truth. Vignory was present at the interview when he entrusted the entire management of the affair to Borisoff, who left Paris the same day in pursuit of Robert."

"Then he has returned, for I saw him yesterday on horseback in the Bois."

"Can it be that he has given up the pursuit, or has he discovered that Robert is still in the city?"

Mademoiselle Dorgères did not reply, but motioned Maxime to be silent. Her father's old valet had just entered the room, and now approached the piano with a silver salver in his hand. "What is it, Joseph?" inquired the girl, without pausing in her playing.

"I have brought the fan and smelling-salts you sent for," was the servant's reply as he placed the salver upon the piano, with a meaning look at Mademoiselle Dorgères. And then he cautiously left the room.

Maxime glanced at the salver, and saw a letter only partially concealed by the open fan. The letter was evidently not there by chance, and the old servant who had taken care to conceal it so adroitly must be the confidant of Alice's secrets. Maxime was stupefied that she should receive clandestine messages, and take a servant into her confidence. However, she read what was passing in her cousin's mind, and whispered softly:

"It is from him."

"So I supposed. Then this servant is also acquainted with the situation of affairs."

"Yes, he was in my father's employ when I was born, and he has always been devoted to Monsieur de Carnoël. He understood what I was suffering, and came to me yesterday to say that if I would allow it he would arrange to bring me the letter for which I was waiting. He swore that Monsieur de Carnoël would write to me, and that he would accept him as a messenger. He was not mistaken, it seems. This letter will decide my destiny. When I have learned its contents I shall know whether I must still struggle on, or die of grief. I beg that you will read it first."

"Never; your love affairs do not concern me."

"Don't you understand that I dare not open it, because I fear to find a confession——"

Maxime started violently. He began to read his cousin's thoughts more clearly. She was asking herself if this abominable accusation could indeed be true, and if the man she adored had allowed himself to be inveigled into some disgraceful affair, by which his honour was for ever ruined. "This is what I desire of you," she continued, with wonderful firmness. "The waltz is nearly ended. You will hand me my fan and smelling-bottle from the salver, and in doing so, you will take the letter. I shall rejoin my father, and you will leave the drawing-room. You can, for instance, go into the library and smoke a cigar, and read the letter there."

"Your lover's letter! What do you take me for?"

"You can read it without scruple. I have nothing to conceal. If the letter explains and justifies Monsieur de Carnoël's conduct, you will return it to me this evening, and I swear to you that I will show it to my father to-morrow. But if it condemns him, burn it and return to the drawing-room. The first glance will tell me whether I have anything more to hope or not."

Maxime was about to refuse this delicate task, but before he had time to do so, his cousin struck the last chords of the waltz, and rose, saying : "Give me my fan, I am stifling."

It was a critical moment. M. Dorgères was approaching. One step more and he would see the letter, so Maxime, sorely against his will, was obliged to pick it up and slip it into his pocket. He did this so cleverly that his uncle's suspicions were not aroused.

"I have given you a good mark, Maxime," said the banker, laughing. "Half-an-hour's work before a piano is certainly meritorious, and I now give you permission to go and smoke a cigar. I am sure that you are longing to do so."

"No, uncle, I should prefer to play whist with you," replied Maxime, who was trying to escape from his trying position.

"Be off, you hypocrite. It would serve you right if I accepted your offer, but the party is already made up, and I release you from duty. Go into the library and smoke ; you will find a box of excellent Havanas on the table."

Everything was against Maxime. Alice bestowed such an entreating glance upon him that he had not courage to refuse, so he made his way slowly to the library. "Bah !" he said to himself on the way, "I will let the child suppose that I am obeying her orders, and in a quarter of an hour I will return, get her into a corner, and hand the letter without a word. She will regard this as a good sign, and won't think to look and see if I have opened it until after she has retired to her room. When she sees that I haven't read it, she will understand that I have declined the responsibility she wished to impose upon me."

With this resolve Maxime entered the library, selected an excellent cigar, lighted it, and sank into a large leather-covered chair in front of a splendid wood fire. The situation was eminently favourable for reflection, and he fell into a profound reverie. The adventures of the preceding night, and the incidents of the present evening rose before him, and seemed to him to be connected in some mysterious way which he did not yet understand. Then his thoughts returned to Robert's letter : "What if the fellow has written that he is guilty ?" he murmured. "In that case I should do Alice a real kindness by sparing her the sorrow of reading such a sad confession. Girls are strange creatures. Who would ever have thought that Alice would engage herself without consulting her father, or make me her confidant ? To burn her lover's letter, if, after reading it, I decide that he is guilty !—a fine commission, surely. She ought to have applied to her father. I shall stand by my first resolve, and leave the letter unopened."

Then his thoughts reverted to the fair stranger of the Rue Jouffroy, and to the information his uncle had just given him about Georget. The story seemed strange, and he decided to ask the page some questions about his benefactress. He knew the Countess Yalta by reputation, but he had never visited her, although several of his friends had offered to present him ; but he now resolved to make up for lost time. "I should have a fine opportunity to display the bracelet in a foreign circle, in which there are, no doubt, many rich adventuresses," he thought.

Then his mind turned to his great scheme—the discovery of the one-handed woman. "For she must be found before we can decide whether Monsieur de Carnoël is innocent or guilty," he thought. "If Alice knew of this adventure she would regard it as conclusive evidence of her lover's

innocence, for he certainly was not with the thief at the time the first attempt was made. And why is Carnoël still in Paris? He wrote to Vignory that he was going away, and if he has remained he must have had important reasons for changing his plans. But what are they? Possibly I might learn them by reading this letter, and the information might enable me to pursue my investigation with some chance of success. Desperate cases call for desperate remedies. I am going to open the letter."

He drew it from his pocket. It bore no postmark, and must consequently have been handed to Joseph either by the writer or by a trusty messenger. He opened it, and read as follows:—"Mademoiselle,—I loved you. I still love you, and believe you loved me; but I was mad to trust to your promises, for you had not the power to keep them. Your father reminded me that you were rich, that I was poor, and that you were dependent upon him. I understood him, and departed. Although determined to exile myself, I could not leave France without kneeling once more on my mother's grave. So I went to Carnoël, in Brittany, where I spent two days amid the ruins of the house in which I was born. Why did I return to Paris? You will laugh at my weakness. I returned because I still hoped. I hoped that Monsieur Dorgères had deceived me—that you had not dared to disobey him, but that you had not forgotten me. Besides, I hoped to see you again, and I did. On Sunday, when you entered the Madeleine, I was among the crowd at the foot of the steps. I even ventured to approach one of your father's old servants, the same who will hand you this letter. He told me that my name was never mentioned, but that you had wept and suffered.

"Then the thought of writing to you to entreat you to see me once more entered my mind. I shall not reproach you; I shall not even ask you to keep the promise you made me. I know that all is over between us. But I do not desire your scorn any more than your pity, and you would have a right to despise me if I did not explain the cause of my sudden departure. When you know the truth you will see that I could not have acted otherwise. To-morrow, Thursday, at three o'clock, I will be in the Bois de Boulogne, at the corner of the Route de l'Etoile and the Route des Bonleaux. Will you have the courage to meet me there with your governess? Madame Martineau shall be present at our interview, which will be short, and she can report it to Monsieur Dorgères. If you don't come, I shall leave Paris to-morrow evening, never to return. Is it *au revoir* or *adieu*?"

"This is a singular love letter, upon my word!" exclaimed Maxime. "The gentleman claims an interview, even while he acknowledges his guilt; for the phrase, 'I could not have acted otherwise' is extremely significant. Poor Alice! what a disappointment! Yes, this lover of hers evidently intends to plead extenuating circumstances. Now, what course am I to take? She told me to throw the letter into the fire if I found that Carnoël was guilty. But when I return to the drawing-room, reading her lover's condemnation in my face, she will have a fainting fit, followed by general consternation. Carnoël is guilty, no doubt; but he has lost none of his pride, and there may be a mystery under all this. His language is certainly not that of a man who has been degraded by an infamous act. Ah, if I could only have ten minutes' conversation with my uncle's secretary!"

Here Maxime suddenly paused, and striking his forehead, exclaimed: "Why shouldn't I lie in wait for my man to-morrow in the Bois? He

won't refuse to answer me when I tell him that I know all. I will even tell him about the severed hand ; and if I should be convinced of his innocence, I will ask him to help me in finding the culprit or culprits. Yes, I will go to the Bois to-morrow. But, the devil ! here is the letter. Ought I to return it to my cousin ? Why not ? The meeting he asks for isn't compromising, since the governess will be present ; and nothing would prevent me from being there too. That will depend upon the explanation that Monsieur de Carnoël gives me beforehand. Yes, I will give this note to Alice. How rejoiced she will be to receive it. A joy that will not be of very long duration, for God only knows what she will think when she has read it. But I can do nothing, and I see no other way of escaping from the situation."

Just then Vignory entered the library with a radiant face.

"Your affairs are prospering, I suppose ?" his friend remarked.

"Yes. I have just had a long conversation with Mademoiselle Dorgères. She sends me to inquire if you have finished your cigar, and to ask you to come and take some tea."

"The time has seemed long to her," muttered Maxime between his teeth ; and he added aloud : "I'm coming. One more whiff, and I shall have finished."

A moment later he folded the letter into the smallest possible compass, and entered the drawing room with it in his hand. Alice was waiting for him, cup in hand, but in spite of the smile upon her lips, her pallor betrayed her emotion. Reassuring her by a glance, he went straight towards her. No one was watching them, not even Vignory, for he had just been called upon to settle some vexed point by M. Dorgères. Accordingly Maxime slipped the letter between Alice's slender fingers, and remarked : "You see I haven't burned it."

"Ah, I knew he was innocent !" she exclaimed.

"You will read it and judge for yourself, and whatever happens, recollect that I am your friend." After this rather ambiguous response, Maxime added in louder tones : "Thank you, cousin. I don't dislike tea, but I fear it. It prevents me from sleeping."

Alice did not insist, but passed on. He saw her approach a table and replace the cup on the tray from which she had taken it. As she did so, she turned her back to the guests and took advantage of this opportunity to conceal the letter in her bosom. Immediately afterwards Maxime quietly disappeared. On his way out he met Joseph, who saluted him in the most deferential manner. "So Monsieur de Carnoël is in Paris ?" asked Maxime.

"I do not know, sir," replied the servant, trying to assume an air that was at the same time stupid and respectful.

Maxime saw that it would be impossible to elicit any information from him, so he questioned him no further. He descended the stairs and left the house with the laudable intention of spending the rest of the night at his club ; but he took a cab, so as not to imperil the famous bracelet which he carried in his pocket this evening, deeming it useless to exhibit it before the respectable matrons who represented the fair sex at M. Dorgères' "at homes."

VI.

As a rule the inhabitants of Paris are not early risers, and at nine o'clock in the morning the cafés are comparatively empty. So, when a young man entered a modest establishment in the Rue du Rocher, early on the morning after M. Dorgères' reception, he merely found a waiter engaged in sweeping. Not a single customer had, as yet, crossed the threshold. But the solitude did not seem displeasing to the new comer, for he entered without heeding the cloud of dust raised by the waiter, and seated himself in a corner. He was very simply dressed, and wore a low hat, but it was evident that he was a person accustomed to command, and the waiter condescended to desist from his work and inquire what he desired.

The young fellow ordered a cup of chocolate, and selected one of the morning papers which had just been brought in. It was not politics that seemed to interest him, for he turned at once to the fourth page and read the advertisements attentively, like a man who is in search of something that he knows he will find there. He did find it in fact, and drawing a memorandum book from his pocket, he copied the following announcement:—

“NORTH AND SOUTH AMERICA. General Intelligence Agency.—Gratuitous information concerning the best investments, mines, agricultural and manufacturing enterprises; situations vacant. Every industrious and intelligent person guaranteed a remunerative position. Travelling expenses paid by the agency. Capital advanced. Correspondents at Havre, Hamburg, Liverpool, and the principal American cities. Apply, from nine to twelve, to M. Briare, representative of the agency, 44 Rue de la Bienfaisance.”

Evidently the young man who had copied this notice into his memorandum-book was in search of transatlantic employment, either for his energies or his capital, most probably the latter, for he had not an impecunious air. A keen observer would have said at once that he belonged to the upper-classes; and he might have been a man of the world suffering from a passing embarrassment, or a capitalist seeking a profitable investment. However that may have been, he did not seem to wish to be seen breakfasting in a third-class café, for he turned his back to the street, and pulled his hat down over his eyes. However, he had one of those faces which, once seen, are not soon forgotten, and if any of M. Dorgères' clients had entered, they would have instantly recognised the ex-secretary of the banker of the Rue de Suresnes.

And yet Robert de Carnoël was greatly changed—pale, with sunken eyes, and an expression of sadness and anxiety. It was evident that he was suffering. He abstractedly swallowed the chocolate and roll that the waiter brought him, and at the end of twenty minutes paid and went out, after glancing at his watch.

The Rue du Rocher is little frequented, and he met only a few pedestrians, who paid no attention to him. After walking on for a little distance, he turned to the right into the Rue de la Bienfaisance. No. 44 was a handsome building with no indication of a business sign, and Robert was obliged to inquire of the porter where the American agency was.

“M. Briare? On the second floor, the first door to the left,” was the

response, whereupon Robert mounted the stairs. On ringing at the door in question he was received by a man as tall and as dignified as a beadle, and whose face was adorned with huge whiskers. This imposing personage scrutinised him, and admitted him without a word as soon as he mentioned M. Briare's name. Seated upon a form in the antechamber were two more liveried servants modelled in every respect after the first one. An agency guarded in such a manner must be in a prosperous condition, and M. de Carnoël congratulated himself upon the wisdom of his choice, as he was led through a passage to a door which his guide opened without knocking. Here he found himself in the presence of a gentleman who was seated at a table covered with papers.

The ceiling was low, and the room was poorly lighted by a window behind the gentleman, whose face was consequently in shadow. A black marble clock, ornamented with a bronze statuette of Christopher Columbus, stood on the mantel-shelf, beneath which a good coke fire was blazing. Three cane-seated chairs awaited the visitors. This furniture was not luxurious, but everything was new, so one might conclude that the agency had not been long established. The occupant of the office was a fair-haired middle-aged man, very carefully dressed, and wearing gold spectacles. Invited to seat himself by a polite gesture, M. de Carnoël took a chair, and again asked for M. Briare. "I am he," was the response. "Will you tell me to what I am indebted for the honour of your visit?"

"I desire some information respecting one of the States of the American Union, and I noticed in a newspaper——"

"That we were prepared to furnish it. Exactly, sir. We are in direct communication with California, Mexico, and Louisiana——"

"I was thinking of Colorado."

"Your application is very well timed. We have in that State some valuable mining property which pays magnificently. Have you called respecting a situation?"

"Perhaps. It will depend very much upon what you tell me respecting the business you speak of, or some other. If I found anything that suited me, I should be inclined to take an interest in it, and accept a situation if sufficiently remunerated."

"And, consequently, go to America?"

"Certainly! I even desire to start as soon as possible, and I shall do so, even if I don't come to an understanding with you."

"Very well. May I ask to whom I have the honour of speaking?"

"What does my name matter? I only wish for some preliminary information."

"I beg your pardon, but we have certain rules that must be observed in such matters. The information our agency furnishes is of a confidential nature, and we wish to know to whom we are giving it."

"You will not be much better off as to guarantees when I tell you that my name is Robert."

"Robert," repeated M. Briare, taking up a pen to enter the name in a book that was lying on the desk before him. "The other name, if you please, sir. Excuse me, it is a mere form, but the chairman of the company I represent insists upon it being attended to."

"Henri Robert, then," replied M. de Carnoël, impatiently.

"What profession?"

"None."

"Your residence?"

"209 Boulevard des Batignolles. Would you also like to know my age and birth-place?" inquired M. de Carnoël, ironically.

"No, sir, that is entirely unnecessary. The information you have so kindly furnished is quite sufficient."

"Then I may hope that you will at last give me the information I desire, instead of questioning me?"

"I am quite at your service, sir. Only permit me to give one of my servants orders to request a gentleman I am expecting to wait. I prefer that no one should interrupt us."

M. Briare touched a bell, and the man with the whiskers made his appearance so quickly that one might almost have fancied he had been standing outside the door. After he had retired with his instructions, M. Briare again turned to Robert. "You intend, then, to select Colorado to utilise your capital and intelligence? That is an excellent idea. Colorado has a great future, and an enterprising young man is sure to make a fortune there. As I just told you, we are connected with a large mining enterprise there. You are young, active, and energetic, and it is easy to see that you have received an excellent education. The knowledge you require of this particular business might be speedily gained by a person of your ability; but I must not conceal the fact that the success of the enterprise depends largely upon a new process for the reduction of ores, which must not be made public, so that we cannot be too careful in the selection of trusty agents. In other words, they must be pecuniarily interested in the success of the undertaking. It will also be a very advantageous investment for them, for they may realise a hundred per cent. profit. May I ask what sum you have at your disposal?"

"Fifty thousand francs. But I should like to reserve ten thousand for my personal expenses."

"I may here remark that the company will defray the expenses of the journey, and allow you a very liberal salary. It must be understood, however, that you are free to decide the sum to which your share of the capital will be limited. Will you be ready to pay in the money at an early day?"

"I have the notes in my pocket now; but you cannot suppose that I intend handing them over to you without further information?"

"I beg you to believe that we are responsible people," replied Briare, assuming a deeply injured tone. "We do not wish our clients to entrust us with their money until they fully understand what they are doing."

"Thank you. But I should really like to decide the matter as soon as possible, and I should be pleased to receive any information that it is in your power to give me."

"I should like nothing better than to furnish it, but all the documents relating to our business are in the hands of our chairman, and you will be obliged to confer with him."

"When can I see him?"

"To-day, at three o'clock."

"I shall not be at liberty then."

"Then you will be obliged to wait until to-morrow. But no—to-morrow he will have to preside at the directors' meeting, which takes place every Friday; on Saturday he must attend a meeting of shareholders. You cannot see him until Monday."

"I cannot wait so long."

"But, now I think of it, why not go and see him this morning at his

house, in the Rue de Vigny. He is very busy, but a message from me which you might deliver to his valet——”

Robert made a significant gesture. Evidently the proposal did not please him.

“But I can do better than that,” resumed M. Briarc. “It just occurs to me that the president wishes me to call on him at two o’clock. Shall we go together? The Rue de Vigny is not far off, but he will probably send his carriage, and his horses go like the wind. The president is also very expeditious in business matters, and in twenty minutes he will tell you all that you need to know.”

“Very well,” said Robert, greatly influenced by this last consideration.

“Then excuse me for a moment. I have some instructions to give in case any one should call in my absence.”

About five minutes afterwards the agent reappeared with his hat in his hand. “The chairman’s brougham is at the door,” he remarked.

M. de Carnoël followed him, and on passing through the ante-room noticed that the whiskered colossus was no longer there; to his surprise he found him seated on the box beside the coachman. The windows of the vehicle were closed, for the morning was very cold, but this did not prevent the unfortunate lover from seeing the people in the Rue de Suresnes. And as if fate was bent on reviving the memories of the past, Robert recognised among the promenaders Maxime Dorgères, who was sauntering along with his hands in his overcoat pockets. Robert quickly averted his head, for he did not wish the banker’s nephew to recognise him, but he fancied he was too late; for their eyes met, and Maxime’s were keen ones.

M. Briarc noticed his companion’s instinctive attempt to conceal himself, and remarked, “Paris is a place where a man is sure to meet the persons he wishes to avoid. Fortunately we are moving fast enough to distance any possible pursuers.”

M. de Carnoël did not deign to reply to this offensive remark. He merely thought his companion inclined to meddle with matters that did not concern him, and then he began to consider the possible consequences of this inopportune meeting. Maxime was not the man to keep a secret, and he would probably tell his uncle, and certainly Vignory, that he had seen M. de Carnoël driving about in a handsome carriage.

The brougham, on emerging from the Parc Monceau, turned to the right and drew up before a lofty door-way. The Rue de Vigny is little frequented, and the only persons visible were some children playing on the side walk; but the sight was not calculated to attract Robert’s attention, and might have escaped his notice altogether had he not chanced to recognise Georget, M. Dorgères’ page, in the centre of the group. The boy looked at him with all his eyes, and his expression implied how greatly surprised he was to see his employer’s ex-secretary. He, like every one else, knew that M. de Carnoël had lost his situation, and he had doubtless heard that he had left France, for nothing but the young man’s abrupt departure had been talked of for several days. However, the next moment the gate was thrown open and the carriage entered the courtyard. On alighting, Robert perceived that the chairman’s residence was a most imposing structure. M. Briarc led his companion into a vestibule filled with superb plants, amid which stood a stuffed bear, holding a tray for the cards of visitors in his paws. The chairman of the International Agency had probably brought this curiosity from some foreign land. Not a

footman nor valet was to be seen. But the ways of the house seemed to be familiar to M. Briare, who invited Robert to follow him, and led him through a long passage to a splendidly furnished drawing-room.

"Will you wait for me here, my dear sir?" said the agent. "The chairman is in his private room. I will inform him that you wish to speak with him, and I will return for you in a moment."

But a quarter of an hour elapsed, and M. de Carnoël was beginning to feel a little impatient, when the colossal attendant of the office reappeared. He had changed his costume, and now wore a kind of military coat that reached almost to his heels. "Walk in, sir," he said, standing aside to allow M. de Carnoël to pass, and then he entered an adjoining room behind him, closed the door, and stationed himself before it.

The apartment into which Robert had just been issued looked like the study of a wealthy and fastidious man of the world. The furniture was of old oak, and there was a profusion of handsome ornaments, rich curtains, and superbly bound books. But what surprised Robert more than all this splendour, was to see M. Briare enthroned behind a massive ebony table. He, too, was transformed. He no longer wore his gold eye-glasses nor his obsequious air, and his face had assumed an exultant expression that made it appear singularly repulsive to M. de Carnoël.

"I came to see your chairman. Why isn't he here?"

"Be seated," said M. Briare, drily.

"That's useless. I have no further business with you, and if the chairman can't see me, I will go away."

"But I have business with you, and you are not going."

"Would you undertake to prevent me?"

"Most certainly."

"And by what right, if you please?" asked Robert, crimson with anger. "Does your agency recruit colonists for Colorado by force?"

"We have nothing to do with Colorado. It is the affair of the Rue de Suresnes we have to consider now."

Robert started, and remained mute with surprise.

"Your name is Henri-Robert de Carnoël," continued M. Briare, coldly.

"A week ago you were the private secretary of M. Dorgères, the banker. Don't deny it; I know you."

"Why should I deny it?" asked the young man, proudly. "I have no reason to blush for the name I bear."

"But you concealed it just now when I asked you for it."

"It does not suit me to give my name to the first person I chance to meet. You know it now, however, and you are going to tell me your object in playing this comedy in which I have no desire to act a part."

"Then have you no idea where you are at the present moment?"

"Not the slightest."

"You surprise me. I thought you much shrewder. But since you feign ignorance, I will tell you that I am acting by virtue of an order from the prefect of police."

"I am even more in the dark, now. What can the prefect of police have to do with the agency you represent?"

"So you are still harping on that subject. Understand, then, that you have been caught. No such company exists. The advertisement in the newspapers was merely a trap. We knew you would return to Paris, and that you would probably desire to settle in America, so I conceived the plan——"

"Spare yourself the trouble of finishing your explanation, and tell me why you were so anxious to find me," interrupted M. de Carnoël.

"On the contrary, the time has come to question you, and I warn you that silence would be equivalent to a confession that you are guilty."

"Guilty of what?"

"Of the robbery that was committed at Monsieur Dorgères'."

"Wretch!" exclaimed Robert, springing forward with clenched fists.

M. Briare would certainly have suffered had not the hercules who was guarding the door come to his employer's rescue; however, he did not attempt to raise his hand against M. de Carnoël, but placed himself in front of the table, a living obstacle.

"I advise you to calm yourself," said the agent, with perfect composure. "Violence is also a poor system of defence, and will not serve you. There are two men in the drawing-room, and I have only to ring to bring them to the assistance of their comrade, if you are still disposed to be troublesome. So I advise you to be more moderate."

Robert was suffocating with rage, but he had the strength to restrain himself.

"As I have told you," resumed M. Briare, "a theft has been committed at Monsieur Dorgères' bank in the Rue de Suresnes. You won't pretend to be ignorant of it, I suppose; all Paris is talking about it."

M. Briare told this untruth intentionally, for if M. de Carnoël expressed any knowledge of the affair it would be equivalent to a confession of guilt, since the secret was confined to the Dorgères, Colonel Borisoff, and the thieves. However, Robert replied in the most natural manner: "I was out of town; I haven't read the papers; and I have seen no one since I left Monsieur Dorgères' house a week ago."

"Last Thursday, was it not? Thursday evening between eleven and twelve o'clock?"

"At half-past eleven."

"You returned about ten o'clock and went out again with a bag in your hand. Why did you leave so precipitately?"

"I will tell you when you have informed me why you ask the question."

"You cannot imagine, of course," said M. Briare ironically. "Still it seems simple enough. At eleven o'clock some one opened your employer's safe with a false key, and half-an-hour afterwards you were gone. You must admit that it is a singular coincidence."

"What! Was the money in the safe stolen? Then Monsieur Dorgères is almost ruined. An enormous amount had been placed in the safe that evening."

"How do you know?"

"Monsieur Dorgères mentioned the matter while I was present. There were more than three millions in the safe. And you accuse me of having stolen them? It's absurd. A man who steals millions gets out of the country at once."

This argument seemed to make an impression upon M. Briare. "You are greatly mistaken," he resumed, "if you think I wish to find you guilty, I am only seeking to discover the truth, and it would be greatly to your interest to give me the information I ask for. You have just remarked that you were in no haste to make your escape, and I must admit that this point is in your favour. Still you left Paris and went to your birth-place in Brittany, where you only remained a short time, however, for the

detectives we sent in pursuit of you the day after your departure were unable to find you."

"The detectives!" Robert exclaimed bitterly. "Then they know down there that I am accused of theft?"

"Certainly not. Our search was conducted in the most cautious manner. Your peasants took the detectives for your friends, and they told them you had taken the train again, though they could not state where you were going."

"I returned direct to Paris."

"Where you took a furnished room under the name of Robert. That was perfectly natural. You had determined to exile yourself, and you wished to break off with all your old acquaintances. The object of your journey to Brittany was, no doubt, to raise some money on the property belonging to you there?"

"This property is merely a ruined castle, which no one would lend any money on."

"You have some money, however, since you talked of investing thirty thousand francs in Colorado. That was the amount you mentioned, I believe?"

"No; fifty thousand," M. de Carnoël replied, unhesitatingly.

"That is so. I recollect now that you said fifty thousand. Where did it come from?"

"What does it matter to you? At least three millions must have been taken from Monsieur Dorgères' safe. My little capital does not amount to that, by any means."

"If you made that remark to an investigating magistrate, he would tell you that you might have concealed the remainder somewhere, at Carnoël, for instance."

"I should tell him to make a search there," retorted Robert, disdainfully.

"And he would find nothing, I am certain; so I shall content myself with inquiring if your money is in gold or in notes."

"In notes, since I have it with me. Now, I, in turn, will ask why you put all these senseless and impertinent questions?"

"You will see presently that they are both sensible and pertinent. The amount stolen from Monsieur Dorgères was exactly fifty thousand francs, the precise sum you have in your pocket."

"Fifty thousand francs! No thief would have been contented with that when he might have taken a fortune."

"Which proves that the perpetrator was, indeed, no ordinary thief. We saw at once that he was of an entirely different stamp, and we immediately thought of you. In fact, when you have heard what I have to tell you, you will be forced to admit that it was only natural our suspicions should fall upon you. Recollect, in the first place, that the perpetrator of the theft must have been able to go in and out at all hours without exciting remark, since no door nor window was broken open."

"You forget that I was not the only person who could come and go unremarked."

"That is true. There was the cashier, Monsieur Vignory, your intimate friend. Do you suspect him as the culprit?"

"Not by any means—Vignory is the most honourable man I know. But there are other clerks."

"But they leave at five o'clock, and do not return before nine in the morning."

"There is also the man who sleeps in the outer office."

"He did not return until midnight on the evening of the robbery; besides he is an old and faithful servant whose past conduct raises him above suspicion; moreover, he as well as the other servants has been closely watched, and it is certain that none of them were mixed up in the affair. Besides, the safe was opened with a false key, and to have made this the thief must have had access to the real one. Now, Monsieur Dorgères had his key, and the cashier his. That of Monsieur Dorgères has been confided to your keeping more than once."

"I deny it."

"At least, your former employer states that he frequently left it on his desk. But that is not everything. To open the safe it was necessary to know the word, a word of five letters. This word you might have read, for you were often in the office during the day-time, while the letters were in position. Do you also deny that?"

"No," said Robert, after some slight hesitation. "I even admit that I noticed the word. It was Mademoiselle Dorgères' Christian name. But is that any reason for accusing me?"

"Certainly not, if it were the only evidence against you, but I have not finished. The safe was protected by a very ingenious contrivance."

"Yes, by two arms so constructed as to seize the hand of any one who attempted to unlock the safe. I was aware of that, for Monsieur Dorgères has often spoken of the arrangement, and I am surprised that the thief was not caught."

"That was because the thief not only knew the word, but also the means of preventing the action of the arms. Monsieur Dorgères had shown you the arrest crank, and explained its workings." *

"Possibly, but I paid very little attention to the explanation, and should have been considerably at a loss if I had been obliged to manipulate the spring. Is that all?"

"No; there is circumstantial evidence. Your flight would be enough to convict you in the eyes of any jury."

"I did not flee. I only left town."

"Secretly; in the middle of the night; without baggage, and without informing any one. If you do not call that flight——"

"You forget that Monsieur Dorgères had dismissed me."

"That is not exactly true. He had informed you that you were relieved of your duties as a secretary, but he had not told you to leave his house. Far from it. He desired you to remain there until your departure for Egypt, where he offered you an excellent situation. But you had reasons for choosing America."

"Enough, sir; you will scarcely succeed in convincing any one that I have dishonoured myself merely for the sake of obtaining possession of a paltry fifty thousand francs. Take me before a magistrate. I will not degrade myself by answering you further."

"As you please. Only allow me to remind you that this magistrate will certainly ask you where you obtained the money you thought of investing in Colorado. Perhaps you will succeed in convincing him that you had saved that amount in two years out of a salary of five hundred francs per month."

"No; for I shall tell him I had saved a hundred louis and no more."

"Then where did the rest of the money come from?"

"I will explain that in the presence of the judge. This farce has

lasted too long already, and I assure you that you will not extort another word from me until I am in the presence of a man who has a right to question me."

"You are free to reply or not, as you like; I do not even insist that you shall listen. However, I must remark that the thief, whoever he was, was not satisfied with appropriating the fifty thousand francs, but also stole a casket containing some valuable papers."

"The casket belonging to the Russian colonel?"

"So you were also aware of that?"

"Certainly. I was present when the owner called to inform Monsieur Dorgères that he proposed to take it away on the following morning."

"And you know nothing more about it?"

"No. I left the house that evening."

"And the next morning, when the cashier reached the office, he found the safe open and the casket gone. Now, we think that the thief was chiefly desirous of obtaining possession of the casket, and that he took the money merely to secure the means of escaping to some foreign country."

"That is quite likely."

"And when I say we, I allude to Colonel Borisoff, who placed this casket in your employer's keeping."

"Was it his plan to bring me here instead of taking me before a magistrate?"

"No; on the contrary, it was the magistrate who gave orders that you should be brought here to be confronted with the complainant, for you are now in Colonel Borisoff's house, and I will now introduce you into his presence. Please follow me."

As he spoke, M. Briare rose and pointed to a door at the other end of the room. Impatient to meet his accuser, though he thought the magistrate's conduct most singular, M. de Carnoël instantly accepted the invitation. M. Briare opened the door and stepped aside to allow his companion to enter first. This politeness was only strategy. A man cannot escape when a person is at his heels, and there were two to prevent Robert from heating a retreat, for the gigantic footman was close behind the agent. But Robert did not think of flight. He crossed the threshold with his head haughtily erect, and was not a little surprised to hear the door close behind him, and to find himself alone in an immense hall. The antique tapestry ornamenting the lofty walls gave an imposing appearance to the apartment, which was only dimly lighted by windows fifteen feet from the ground. A haron of the feudal ages might have held his court there to pronounce sentence upon his vassals. Before the hearth, where a splendid fire was blazing, stood two heavily-carved arm-chairs, and on a table, within reach of those who seated themselves at this seignorial fireplace, was an assortment of Oriental pipes and a pile of cigar-boxes. But the master was not there, and Robert concluded that he wished to learn the result of M. Briare's examination before making his appearance.

Everything seemed stranger and stranger to the young man. He was not very familiar with the Criminal Code, but he did know that a French magistrate is not allowed to modify it to suit his fancies, and he was almost tempted to regard the whole affair as a hoax. But he was not left long in uncertainty. A door concealed in the woodwork opened noiselessly, and Colonel Borisoff appeared.

Robert had seen him only once in fashionable attire, and he scarcely

recognised him in the national garb of a Russian lord—a caftan of embroidered velvet, large pantaloons *à la Tartare*, and Turkish slippers. However, the colonel's military air remained, and one could detect the soldier under his Asiatic costume. He bowed slightly, and motioned the young man to take a seat.

"I trust, sir," began Robert, curtly, "that you will at once explain why you have brought me here, by means of a ruse which I will not call by the name it deserves."

"You know perfectly well, sir," was the quiet reply; "the agent who brought you here has just explained the reason."

"This man pretends that he is acting in virtue of a formal warrant; but I am not deceived by this falsehood, and I am convinced that he is acting only under your orders."

M. Borisoff reflected for a moment; and then he said, with a gentleness that surprised Robert, "It seems to me, sir, that you are adopting the wrong course. Why discuss the validity of an agent's power in relation to facts that affect your honour? You can't deny the fact that you are accused of robbery."

"Yes, by you."

"By myself, and by others. But what does that matter? Even if I were the only person who believed you guilty, a gentleman must have some regard for the opinion of another gentleman."

"You forget that I'm not free. If we were on neutral ground, I would take the trouble to convince you of my innocence, and then demand satisfaction. Here, in your house, I absolutely refuse to reply."

"You are wrong, for it rests with me whether this affair shall end here or not."

"Do you pretend to control justice? I was not aware that we were in Russia."

"No, but in every country the party that lodges a complaint has a right to withdraw it."

"You mean you can dispose of me as you please. I don't believe it."

"Listen, sir, and you will understand the situation more clearly. I had strong reasons for believing that my casket was stolen by some one who had a special interest in securing possession of the papers it contained, consequently I had no suspicions of you; but my ideas underwent a change when Monsieur Dorgères told me of your hurried departure, and the facilities you had for opening the safe. What I wish to make you understand is, that I only care for the recovery of my casket. The rest is a mere trifle."

"You call the theft of fifty thousand francs a mere trifle!" said Robert, ironically.

"Yes, for Monsieur Dorgères is reconciled to the loss of the money, or I am ready to reimburse him. I only care for the recovery of my papers. I hardly believed that you abstracted them, and if you had not acknowledged that you had fifty thousand francs in your possession I should have been scarcely willing to proceed any further in the matter. But you have the notes taken from Monsieur Dorgères."

"I would not condescend to tell that man how they came into my possession. To you, I am willing to say that I received them three days ago."

"From whom?"

"From a person who owed my father the amount, and had been unable to pay him."

"What is this person's name?"

"I don't know. The money was sent to me in an envelope, with a letter telling me that I could accept it without scruple, since it was only a restitution. The letter was not signed."

"Did you preserve it?"

"Yes; I have it with me."

"Will you show it to me?"

"No. I will show it to the magistrate when he examines me."

"I should not advise you to do so. Such a justification would seem very inadequate. But to return to my argument. I repeat that the person who took the fifty thousand francs also took the casket. You must be that person, so you have my papers, or, at least, you know where they are. I ask you to return them to me, or if, as I fear, they have passed into other hands, to help me in recovering them."

"It seems you are still inclined to insult me," said M. de Carnoël, contemptuously.

"I would advise you to consider my proposal carefully," said M. Bori-soff, without seeming to notice his haughty response. "If the authorities take hold of the affair you are lost. Everything is against you. The explanation you have just given me is absolutely inadmissible. But tell me what you have done with the casket, and I give you my word of honour that all pursuit shall cease at once. I will inform the magistrate that the papers have been returned, and I will remit fifty thousand francs to Monsieur Dorgères, by some person who shall remain unknown. I will do even more. I will go and see Monsieur Dorgères, and do my best to convince him that his suspicions were unjust. I will even tell him that I have discovered the thief, and I swear that no particle of suspicion of you shall remain in the mind of any one."

"Not even in the mind of the agent who questioned me?" asked Robert, bitterly.

The colonel reflected a moment, and then, raising his head with the air of a man who has just come to a decision, he said: "I see that the moment to tell you the whole truth has come, for I have not told you all, and since you hesitate to accept my offer you must be made to understand the real situation. You doubt my ability to stop an investigation already commenced, and think that even if I consented to be silent, and succeeded in persuading Monsieur Dorgères to keep the matter a secret, I could not ensure the silence of the agent. You need have no fears on that score. The man is a Russian and my major-domo."

"Then you lied when you declared that the authorities had taken hold of the affair?"

"You have just used a word you will regret," said the colonel, with unruffled composure.

"So all that has passed here is simply a farce!" exclaimed Robert. "The rascal who questioned me is your major-domo, and the other scoundrel in livery is undoubtedly your servant."

"He was a non-commissioned officer in my regiment."

"I doubt it. He looks like a bandit."

"Come," said the Russian, with a composure that amazed M. de Carnoël. "You are angry, and you are trying to make me lose my patience, but you will not succeed. I know very well that you are my equal by birth and by education, and that you would consequently have a right to challenge me, and that I should be obliged to grant you satisfaction if the

situation were a normal one. But things are different. When you prove your innocence, you will find me ready to fight with you, but until then I shall be guided by the customs that prevail in society. A man does not cross swords with a person who owes him money, much less with a person who is suspected of having stolen his property. My casket is the most valuable of my possessions, and I suspect you of having taken it."

"This is a convenient rule for cowards. It is easy to avoid a duel by saying, 'I suspect you of a crime.'"

"You persist in avoiding the question. You are very wrong, and I beg you will reflect once more before compelling me to adopt a course which is very repugnant to me. A robbery was committed, and Monsieur Dorgères was the first to accuse you. The cashier defended you, and so did I, but we did not succeed in convincing him. He wished to lodge a complaint at once, and it was I who succeeded in persuading him not to do so. Now, if I do not succeed in obtaining a confession from you, a confession that would set everything right, I must place you in the hands of those who will examine you more rigorously, and who will understand how to wring the truth from you."

"Do so!" said Robert, defiantly.

"I have only to ask Monsieur Dorgères to go with me to the prefect of police, and he will not refuse."

"Do it, I tell you! I don't fear to explain the facts to the authorities of my country."

"You forget, sir, that an accused person, even though he be innocent, is a ruined man. If you appeared before the assizes you might possibly be acquitted; but, even then, not one of your former friends would take you by the hand, and your dishonour would be reflected upon the household you lived in—upon Monsieur Dorgères and his daughter."

"I forbid you to speak of Mademoiselle Dorgères."

"You turn pale," M. Borisoff quietly resumed; "I have touched the right chord at last. You realise the danger I allude to. It is in your power to avoid it, and I entreat you not to persist in following a course that will lead you to ruin. Give me a full explanation. I have promised secrecy, and I will keep my promise."

"And if I refuse, what will happen?"

"One of two things: either I shall deliver you up to the authorities, or I shall detain you here until you come to your senses."

"I have a third course to suggest. Take me to Monsieur Dorgères. To him I will reveal everything."

"But Monsieur Dorgères would pay little heed to your explanations. Besides, he has given up everything to me. He has forgotten his trifling loss; the theft of the casket was most important, and that concerns only myself."

"You yourself have declared that the two robberies were one. If I prove that I have not taken the fifty thousand francs, it will prove that I have not taken the casket."

"Then you persist in declaring that you are innocent!" murmured Borisoff, shaking his head. "Ah! I see that we shall not be able to come to an understanding, at least not to-day, and so I shall carry out my plan of allowing you time for reflection by keeping you here. It is your own fault. How can you expect me to send you to Monsieur Dorgères? How do I know that you would not escape on the way? I have no prison-van at my disposal."

"But you have serfs disguised as footmen ; they would suffice, it seems to me. You don't suppose I would call the passers-by to my help? Besides, what prevents you from accompanying me?"

"It would not do for me to be seen with you."

Robert trembled under this insult, and resumed, in a voice that was husky with rage in spite of all his efforts to appear calm : "If I gave you my word of honour to return, and place myself at your disposal before the end of the day, would you allow me to go out?"

"To repair to the Rue de Suresnes?"

"No."

"Then why do you desire to make the excursion?"

"How does that concern you, providing I promise faithfully to return this evening?"

"You would not, I presume, pledge yourself to see no one during your absence without acquainting me with the object of the interview ; so you will not be surprised if I decline an arrangement which might, perhaps, be of advantage to you, but which might derange all my plans."

"Very well. I thought I had to deal with a gentleman. I was mistaken ; you are only a jailer."

"The jailer of a very pleasant prison," replied the colonel, with a smile that exasperated M. de Carnoël. "A bed will be brought in for you every evening, and your meals will be served here. My servants are at your orders ; you have only to ring. I have an excellent cook, and here are some well-chosen books and some exceptionally fine cigars. I hope you will not suffer from *ennui* ; besides, you are free, as soon as you choose to tell me where my casket is." And without giving his prisoner time to utter a word, M. Borisoff, who had gradually approached the wainscoting, opened the door by which he had entered, and disappeared.

VII.

WHILE Robert de Carnoël was struggling for his honour and liberty with Colonel Borisoff, Maxime Dorgères was spending his time in a very different fashion. Strange to say, he had retired and risen early. On leaving his uncle's, he had found only a languid game of *baccarat* going on at the club, and he had not thought it worth while to revive it. His conversation with Alice engrossed his mind completely. He thought of the intended interview in the Bois de Boulogne, and was more than ever resolved to lie in wait for the lover and force him to make a confession. Still this was a very delicate step, and required considerable preparation ; so he returned home to reflect. His thoughts were so busy that he found it difficult to sleep, and he was beset with absurd dreams, until he was awakened by his valet, who came to light his fire.

Maxime had been installed for more than a year in an elegantly furnished suite of apartments in the Rue de Châteaudun. His establishment was not on a grand footing, for he kept no carriage, and was content with a single saddle horse. Still, his uncle had good cause to reproach him for rushing along the road to ruin. He practised nearly all the known methods of squandering money, except those which gratify one's vanity, and he would even have invented others had it been possible. His only investments were in pocket money, and his pocket emptied itself with marvellous rapidity.

However, on the day following his uncle's reception he rose with the sun, and, as the afternoon was to be spent in the excursion to the Bois de Boulogne, he started out at once with the intention of visiting Georget's grandmother. He was, indeed, anxious to reward his young preserver in a more substantial manner than by mere recommendation to M. Dorgères.

Desirous of again viewing the route he had followed on leaving the skating-rink, he set out on foot through the Rue de Tivoli, the Place de l'Europe, and the Rue de Constantinople.

It seemed to him he could still see the sparkling eyes of the lovely stranger shining through her veil, and feel the soft pressure of her delicately-gloved hand. He cursed the delay she had imposed upon him, and with the idea that she had perhaps only been mocking him, he decided he should not incur much risk by endeavouring to shorten it. The Rue Jeuffroy being almost on his way, the temptation became too strong to be resisted. He instantly recognised the house inhabited by the so-called Madame Sergent, and involuntarily paused before it. The shutters were closed, and not a particle of smoke emerged from the handsomely-constructed chimneys. Indeed, the building showed no signs of being occupied, and Maxime concluded that the woman had not deceived him when she expressed her intention of leaving Paris next day.

Then he reflected that she must have left some one in charge of the house, and that this, perhaps, was the best time to gain some information concerning her. Porters generally are not incorruptible, and the sight of a gold piece is almost certain to unloosen their tongues. So Maxime took a louis from his pocket and walked straight to the door, holding the coin between his thumb and finger. However, it was not until after a third peal of the bell that the door opened, and a man presented himself. This person, who wore an immense moustache, did not look in the least like a valet, but bore a close resemblance in bearing and attire to a sub-officer in plain clothes. "Is this house for sale?" inquired Maxime.

"Neither for sale nor for rent," replied the man, who had not let go his hold on the door, and who was evidently quite ready to close it.

"That's strange. I was told that the owner wished to dispose of it. I must have made a mistake in the number. Still, it is certainly here that Madame Sergent lives."

"I know no one of that name."

"Impossible! I have met the lady several times, and once even had the honour of escorting her here, and she told me——"

"Once more I assure you that I don't know who Madame Sergent is. Try the next door."

Maxime was going to insist further, when the door was quickly shut in his face. This proceeding was by no means pleasing to Maxime, who pulled the bell violently; but the door did not open again. He was in a most ridiculous position, as he fully realised, and he fell into a violent passion. He rang still more violently, and even beat and kicked against the closed door; but the only result was to bring to the threshold of the house just opposite a man wearing a cap and linen apron, a genuine porter this time, who leaned upon his broom, the insignia of his profession, and contemplated Maxime with an astonished air. This apparition calmed the young man. The coin was still in his hand, and the thought that this louis might prove more effectual with the neighbour over the way flashed across his mind. He was right. When the man saw the gold piece glittering in the hand of this well-dressed gentleman he smiled in an

encouraging manner, without forgetting to raise his cap. This decided Maxime, who immediately crossed the street. "I have just had to deal with a very ill-mannered person," he remarked, playing with the coin.

"Ah, yes; the Prussian," was the reply.

"What, is that fellow a Prussian?"

"A Prussian, Pole, or Bavarian, it is hard to tell which, as he speaks every language; but we call him the Prussian, because he is about as pleasant as a prison-door. He takes care of that house."

"But it is occupied."

"No, sir. There is no one—at least I have never seen any other person there."

"That's strange. I thought it was occupied by a lady."

"A lady! this is the first time I have heard of it. We have never seen anything but that boor and a lot of furniture. We tried to be sociable with him, and to learn something about his employers, but we received nothing but a volley of oaths in all sorts of languages. Still, he can speak as good French as you or I when he chooses, but it is not often."

"Are you sure the man is a servant?"

"Not certain, but we judge so from his manners and way of living. He never goes out, not even to meals, and receives no visitors except at night, at unheard-of hours."

"I don't understand it," said Maxime, thoughtfully, slipping the coin into the hand of the porter, who had been contemplating it with covetous eyes. "I thought the house was occupied by a Madame Sergent."

"Madame Sergent?" repeated the obliging concierge. "Wait a moment. I know a shopkeeper of that name. Her husband is a post-man."

"She can't be the person I am looking for. This lady is very pretty, exceedingly elegant, and young, with large, dark eyes."

"Oh, yes, I understand. She has probably given you a wrong address."

"Yes, I begin to think she was fooling me," muttered Maxime between his teeth.

"Still, monsieur has only to leave me his card, and if ever I hear of any person of that name it will give me great pleasure to tell him all I have learned."

But Maxime was already out of hearing, being eager to think over the strange discovery he had just made. "More mysteries!" he exclaimed. "Certainly the brunette played me a strange trick. Why did she bring me to a house which cannot belong to her, since she isn't known in the neighbourhood? Still, she entered it, and she had the key, so the man must know who Madame Sergent is. However, she may have had important reasons for refusing to see me in less than a fortnight. She may have a jealous husband. I may have ruined my chances by calling before the appointed time; and who knows if she were not concealed behind the blinds watching me? However, I'm not going to be discouraged by a trifle. I will try again, and in the meantime I will ask my friend Georget to make some inquiries in the neighbourhood. I will even ask him to watch the house in his spare moments, and he has plenty of them."

These reflections brought Maxime to the Rue Cardinet. He soon found the house where Georget resided with his grandmother, and noticed that it was anything but attractive in appearance, being apparently occupied

exclusively by labouring people. "If the Countess Yalta visits her *protégés*, she is certainly an eccentric person," thought Maxime. "But it is probable that she has never set foot here. The porter's quarters in such a hole can be little more than a kennel."

He crossed the muddy threshold, and bravely entered a damp, dark corridor. A few steps farther on he came to a glass door and rapped. No one answered the summons, but he heard a voice and a sort of stir within. Then the sounds suddenly ceased, and a woman's face appeared at the glass, but Maxime, not caring to converse through such a medium, turned the knob of the door and pushed it open. "What do you wish, sir?" inquired the woman, stepping forward to bar his entrance.

"I wish to see Madame Piriac."

"I am Madame Piriac, sir. You probably come for the flowers I was to send Monsieur Vervelle."

"No, madame, I don't know Monsieur Vervelle."

"Then, will you kindly tell me to whom I have the honour of speaking?"

This well-chosen language naturally surprised Maxime, who began to examine the speaker more attentively. Her tall form was a trifle bent by age, but her features retained a youthful appearance, which contrasted strangely with her snow-white hair. Her eyes were bright, her complexion fresh, and it was easy to see that she had been beautiful. She was simply, but very neatly dressed, and no one would have taken her for a concierge. "I am the nephew of Monsieur Dorgères, the banker," replied Maxime.

Madame Piriac made a movement of surprise, and seemed slightly embarrassed. She turned, probably to satisfy herself that her room was in a condition to receive such a distinguished visitor, and a moment elapsed before she spoke again. Then she quietly said: "Will you walk in, sir? You will excuse me for receiving you in this poor apartment."

Maxime's first surprise was now increased by finding himself in a large, well-lighted room, furnished somewhat elegantly. There was a canopied bedstead, with some arm-chairs, covered with figured Utrecht velvet, while a Louis XVI. clock stood upon the mantel-shelf. Behind a curtain of antique tapestry there was a door which must lead into an adjoining room. But in spite of the comforts that surrounded her, it was evident that Madame Piriac worked with her hands, for the table was covered with the various materials used by the makers of artificial flowers, and upon it lay a large bunch of roses, ready to be sent to the dealer who had ordered them.

"Sit down, sir," said the widow, offering her visitor a chair. "My grandson has often spoken of you, and I feel greatly honoured."

"Georget has probably told you that he did me a great service the other evening," said Maxime, taking the proffered seat.

"No, sir, he did not mention it."

"What! he did not tell you that he helped me in escaping from some men who were following me to rob me? I did not fancy he was so discreet. I am greatly indebted to him, and would like to pay the debt I owe him. He is so young that he could not make a proper use of the money I intend to give him; so I thought it better to entrust it to you."

As he spoke, he felt for his pocket-book, but the widow checked him with a gesture. "I thank you," she said quickly; "but I can accept

nothing. My grandson earns a fair living, and I am still able to work, so we require help from no one, and I beg that you will not insist."

This was said in such a tone that the young man felt he had made a mistake. "I ask your pardon, madame," he said; "I ought to have seen that you have not always been in the position to which undeserved misfortunes have brought you."

"You are mistaken, sir. I am the widow of a poor mechanic, and the son I lost a few years ago was merely a bank messenger, after serving as a common soldier. There is no reason why I should not accept the reward, except that I don't know that my grandson has deserved it, and that I am certain he would refuse it."

"Then, all I can do is recommend him to my uncle, and that I have already done. I requested him yesterday to increase Georget's salary, and to entrust him with more important duties."

"I am very grateful to you, sir; but I wish my grandson to be a soldier like his father, or a sailor. He is still too young to enter the army, but he might serve as a cabin-boy, and that is what he will do very soon. He entered the bank very much against my will."

"Through the recommendation of the Countess Yalta, I believe. At least my uncle told me so. He added that this lady took an interest in you on account of a great service rendered to her father by your son. Do you see the countess often?"

"Never, sir," Madame Piriac quickly responded. "My son met her when he was a prisoner in Russia, and though she was then but a child, she never forgot him. When she came to Paris, a short time ago, she sent for Georget, and told him that she would take charge of his future, and that to begin with, she had found a situation for him. Georget did not dare to decline it, nor did I refuse an act of intended kindness performed in honour of my son's memory; but I intend to write to the countess soon, and respectfully request her to allow Georget to adopt another calling."

Maxime was greatly disconcerted. He did not know what to say to this concierge, whose manners were those of a dowager. "I submit, madame," he said politely, "and I hope you will not forbid me to feel an interest in Georget, and to serve him if he ever has need of me, for he certainly was the means of saving my life before a certain house in the Rue Jouffroy which you certainly must know of, for the people that occupy it have created a great deal of gossip in your neighbourhood."

"I regret that I am not able to give you any information about it," said Madame Piriac, rising from her arm-chair. "I never go out, and I have no visitors. I do not even know where the Rue Jouffroy is."

Maxime understood that the interview was ended, so he rose, saying—"Excuse me, madame, for having intruded upon you. You had some one with you when I came in, and——"

"No, sir, I was alone," interrupted the concierge.

"You were alone!" repeated Maxime, in great astonishment. "That's singular. I thought I heard you talking to some one——"

"You are mistaken, sir. There only remains for me to thank you for your interest in my grandson. We cannot accept the kind protection you are pleased to offer us, but I am proud and pleased to know that he has deserved it."

This was a dismissal couched in such terms that Maxime was thunder-struck. The grandmother of his uncle's liveried page had decidedly the

best of it, so he did what people always do when they find themselves ridiculous—stammered a few words of apology, bowed awkwardly, and left the apartment, feeling that he knew even less than when he entered it.

“Zounds!” he muttered, when he found himself once more in the street, “this is no ordinary concierge; one would have sworn that she had formerly moved in aristocratic circles. It is only in Paris that one meets such eccentric creatures, and there is some mystery about the whole affair. Madame Piriac knows this Countess Yalta: her story did not deceive me. I think if I want to solve this mystery I must apply to Georget. I must drop in at the office to have a talk with Vignory soon, and on coming out I will pick up Georget in the waiting-room, and take him to the pastry-cook’s at the corner, where some cakes and a glass of Madeira will unloosen his tongue.”

The thought of the pastry-cook’s reminded Maxime that he had eaten nothing that morning, and he felt hungry. As a rule he breakfasted at home, but he had gone out without telling his valet when he would return; so it seemed to him advisable to go to Tortoni’s for refreshment. It was some distance to the Boulevard des Italiens, but he felt in the humour for a walk. Besides, it was only ten o’clock, and the longer it took him to go the more likely he was to meet some of his acquaintances there.

On reaching the Rue de Lisbonne his attention was attracted by an elegant brougham, and he paused an instant to look at it as it passed. To his intense surprise he perceived Robert de Carnoël seated inside. He only caught a glance of him, but he could have sworn that his uncle’s ex-secretary had made an attempt to conceal himself.

“It is certainly he,” he murmured, watching the brougham which sped along like a meteor. “Yesterday I learned that he was in Paris, but I did not suspect that he was rolling about in carriages. Where is he going? What is he doing in that fine equipage? Really, I begin to believe that this Russian may have been right in accusing him. Monsieur Robert must be acquainted with some very wealthy people. In fact, the despairing lover seems to be leading a pretty comfortable life. I was really wrong to defend him, and I shall have a little explanation with him which will not be to his advantage, for I defy him to exonerate himself. So much the worse for him. It is my duty to warn Alice, and I shall certainly do so. She shall know that her lover’s actions are very suspicious, to say the least. Ah, ha! my friend Vignory’s prospects are improving.”

On arriving at this consoling conclusion, Maxime decided to engage a passing cab to take him to Tortoni’s, and in less than a quarter of an hour he was seated alone in the little *salon* looking out upon the Rue Taitbout. While the oysters he ordered were being opened, he asked for the newspapers. He had read the evening before that the hand fished out of the Seine was on exhibition at the Morgue, and he vaguely hoped to find some paragraph bearing on the subject. So he took up a paper, and while glancing over the third page his eyes fell upon an article with this heading in capitals:

“MYSTERY UPON MYSTERY.

“Late yesterday evening the strangest possible occurrence took place at the Morgue. The hand which was on exhibition there mysteriously disappeared, and it was certainly stolen. How and by whom have not yet

been discovered. This information was brought to us just as we were going to press, and we are not yet prepared to give the details of this extraordinary robbery. We learn, however, that the hand was removed while the keepers of the place were at dinner. It had been on exhibition all day, and was still there when the doors were closed. But the watchman, on making his rounds at ten o'clock, discovered that it had disappeared. It seems probable that the thief entered the Morgue through one of the windows opening upon the river, but there was nothing to indicate it. An investigation has been commenced, and our readers may rely upon receiving prompt and accurate information concerning the results of this inquiry, which will, undoubtedly, throw some light on the mysterious affair."

"Yes," muttered Maxime, "rely upon it, worthy readers, and you will wait a long time. There is no one who can give you any information but myself, and I shan't gratify you. I shall keep my information for my individual use. I knew very well that the lady would desire to regain possession of her hand, and so she sent her accomplice to recover it. For this is the work of the accomplice. His methods are always the same. He entered the Morgue as he entered my uncle's office, without the least violence. Only here the task was more difficult. Still, nothing could daunt him. Ah! these people are cunning, and no mistake," he concluded, pouring out a glass of chablis, which he emptied at a draught to stimulate his intellectual faculties. He really needed the stimulant, for this second blow had fairly disturbed him. For the first time since he had begun his investigation, he realised the peril with which it was fraught.

"What wouldn't they give to recover the bracelet?" he thought. "They are evidently capable of anything, and they must be thoroughly well informed." This reflection was like a flash of lightning illuminating the previous incidents of his campaign. He remembered the men who had laid in wait for him at the corner of the Rue Jouffroy, and said to himself that they might have been in league with the beautiful brunette. "She wasn't the thief," he murmured. "A woman doesn't skate immediately after undergoing the amputation of a hand, but she is perhaps an emissary of the thief, who sent her to lure me into a trap. I must keep my eyes open. In future I will distrust all pretty women, and to tell the truth, the wisest thing I could do would be to go to the prefect of police and tell him the whole story. But I should compromise Vignory, and my dear little cousin would not like an affair that places Monsieur de Carnoël in such an unenviable light to be noised abroad, for she is still crazy about the fellow, and heaven only knows if I shall succeed in curing her."

While thus deliberating, Maxime attacked his oysters, and he had just swallowed the last of them when Dr. Villagos entered the room. He advanced towards Maxime with a smiling face and outstretched hand, and, expressing his delight at the meeting, took a seat beside him. "One never sees you now," said Dorgères. "I have been to the club several times without meeting you."

"That's true," replied Villagos. "I have been spending three or four nights with a patient, who has caused me a great deal of uneasiness, but she is now improving, and this evening I shall resume whist-playing in spite of all the quinsy and laryngitis prevailing in the city."

"Have you read the papers this morning?" asked Maxime, after the doctor had ordered his breakfast.

"No. I must admit that I scarcely ever read them. Politics send me

to sleep, and as for Parisian news, I get enough of it while making my calls. Most of my patients are ladies, and ladies are always wonderfully conversant with everything that is going on."

"Then you have heard about the theft of the hand from the Morgue?"

"Yes, I have heard it spoken of. It is a strange affair. To brave the penal code to carry off an anatomical object, is a singular thing indeed. But nothing is sacred to a thief."

"What do you think of the affair?"

"What do I think of it? Why, I only know what people tell me, and I never had the slightest skill in solving rebuses. Besides, I must confess that these judicial problems interest me very little. But tell me something about the conclusion of the romance which I saw the opening of at the rink. That will be a more cheerful topic of conversation. Would it be indiscreet to inquire how your adventure terminated?"

"Very disastrously, my dear doctor."

"Indeed! But I thought I saw you leaving with the lady?"

"Oh, she allowed me to escort her home, and I availed myself of the permission; but I did not foresee the finish of this comedy. She refused the offer of a cab, but took my arm, and led me into a district with which I am but slightly acquainted. Then, when she reached the door of her house, she bade me a hasty good-night and left me. Nor was that all. On returning I was followed by several scoundrels who evidently wanted to rob me, and I should have had a hard time of it had I not chanced to meet a lad in my uncle's employ, who helped me out of my difficulty by finding me a cab."

"Then you cannot have been pleased. The marvel begins to appear somewhat suspicious to me. I wonder if she were in league with the rascals who pursued you?"

"I asked myself the same question, but I do not like to believe it. She had the manners of a princess."

"Appearances, particularly Parisian appearances, are often deceitful. A pretty rag-picker, if dressed by a fashionable *modiste* and installed in a handsome establishment, would pass off as a great lady, and play the duchess to perfection in a month. What is her name?"

"Oh! she gave me a feigned name of the commonest kind, Madame Sergent. I assure you, doctor, that woman is an enigma. Still, for the last few days, I have only seen and heard the most extraordinary things. Would you believe it, that young rascal who acts as errand-boy in my uncle's establishment is under the protection of a wealthy foreigner, a rich stranger whom you must at least know by reputation—the Countess Yalta?"

"Why, I know her well. She is one of my best patients. She has just sent for me, and I am going to her as soon as I have finished my breakfast."

"That's strange. My uncle told me she had left for Nice or Monaco."

"She did start, but returned yesterday. It would seem as if the trip didn't agree with her since she has sent for me."

"Well, as you are her regular physician, you can tell me something about her. No one else is talked of now, and every day I hear all sorts of fantastic stories in which she figures. She seems to me very like one of the princesses in the Arabian Nights."

"She is not unlike them, that's a fact," said Dr. Villagos, smiling.

"In what part of the world is her principality situated?"

"You ask me too much. I only know that she is immensely rich, and has very peculiar tastes. It is impossible, too, for her to remain any length

of time in one place. She left for Italy the other day to spend the winter there, and after a short absence she is back again, and I shouldn't be at all surprised if she started to-morrow for the third cataract of the Nile."

"All Russians seem to me to be formed much after the same model."

"But I do not think she is a Russian."

"Pardon, doctor, but the interest she takes in the lad I spoke of just now is due, I am told, to a service rendered to her noble father, by the father of the youth aforesaid, while he was a prisoner in Russia."

"She may have lived in Russia during her childhood, but I am almost certain that she is a subject of the Sultan, and that she was born in one of the Asiatic provinces of the Ottoman Empire. She married a Greek, a member of one of the families that claim to be descendants of the Byzantine emperors. However, she has been a widow for three years."

"How old is she?"

"I have never ventured to ask her. She looks very young, but must be about thirty."

"She is pretty, isn't she? I have only seen her at a distance."

"Well, I scarcely know how to tell you what I think of her face. I don't know whether she is beautiful or ugly. I only know that she charms every one who comes in contact with her."

"Judging from all accounts, she is extremely eccentric, and leads a very strange life."

"Well, she certainly delights in all kinds of manly sports; hunts, shoots, and fences, and is an expert in each exercise. But these peculiarities don't prevent her from being the most agreeable and elegant of women whenever she chooses. No one can excel her in dress; on this point she puts the most consummate Parisienne to shame. You should see her when she gives a *fête*; she is a great lady from head to foot. Moreover, she has wonderful culture. She is a thorough musician and artist, and if it pleased her to write plays or romances, they would be a prodigious success. Still, after all, she is the most unassuming person I ever met. If you knew her, you would be of the same opinion. But, now I think of it, how does it happen that you have never visited her? All your friends go there."

"To her balls, yes. But I don't care for amusements of that kind; I hate crowds."

"But you might visit her informally if you chose. Would you like me to present you?"

"By what right?"

"Simply that of a friend. I flatter myself you regard me a little in that light, and the countess honours me with her confidence. She knows that I wouldn't venture to bring her a stupid man, and she will thank me for making her acquainted with a man of wit. You have precisely the character and temperament to please the countess; and if you visited her often you would perform a very worthy action, for she is dying of *ennui*."

"What, rich and independent as she is? It seems to me she would find it hard to choose from the many diversions at her command. Has she no lovers?"

The doctor shook his head, and replied, in a somewhat confidential tone: "My dear sir, you have put your finger on the wound. The countess does not, and I believe never has, loved any one. Between you and me, I believe that God, in creating her, forgot to give her a heart. If she had one, she would be perfect."

"That is a rather bold diagnosis," remarked Maxime. "Every woman has a heart, though some hearts don't speak until late in life."

"There are also some that never speak. I have studied the countess. She is as cold as the North Pole. She has a great deal of imagination, and not the slightest sensibility. It is probably on account of this peculiarity of temperament that she leads such a life of excitement. I have given up the hope of curing a malady which medicine has no power over, and confine myself to treating her for a neuralgia which she contracted last year while shooting in the marshes. But it is my duty to warn you that if you allow yourself to be beguiled into making love to her, you will only lose your time."

"Have no fears, doctor; I shan't attempt it. She is a blonde, and I only admire brunettes. If I decide to go and see her it will merely be from curiosity. I shall go to her house as one goes to Chamounix to contemplate Mont Blanc; and partially, I confess, to speak to her about the little fellow she protects, and who has rendered me such a service."

"That would be an excellent excuse for your visit. When would you like me to present you?"

"Whenever you like; next week, perhaps."

"Next week the countess may be on her way to America or Constantinople. One can never tell at night what she will do the next morning, and she does not know herself."

"Still, you must have time to announce my intended visit."

"Why? My patient only cares for unexpected meetings. If I asked permission to bring you, she would grant it, no doubt; but your coming on the appointed day would not be a surprise, while she would be delighted to receive you unexpectedly. So why not come with me by-and-by?"

"I have an appointment at two o'clock this afternoon."

"But you are free until then, are you not? and it is not yet noon. When we have smoked a cigar we can take a cab and drive to the countess's residence."

"What are you thinking of, doctor? I am in morning costume, and the countess must still be in bed."

"In bed!" exclaimed M. Villagos. "It is evident that you are not acquainted with her habits. She rises with the sun, and I would wager anything that we shall find her breaking a horse or exercising in her gymnasium."

"It is in that way she cures her neuralgia, probably," said Maxime, laughing.

"She has her own peculiar method of treatment, and only consults me for form's sake."

"Well, your countess is certainly a phenomenon, and I shouldn't be sorry to find her engaged in her exercises."

"It is decided, then; you will go with me?"

"Yes, but I hold you responsible for the breach of etiquette. However, I must remind you that it is absolutely necessary for me to be in the Bois de Boulogne at half past two at the very latest."

"The Bois?" repeated the doctor. "That suits exactly. The countess lives very near the Place de l'Etoile, so you can make a long call without missing your rendezvous, for I suppose it is a rendezvous. This isn't the time for strolling round the lakes."

It seemed to Maxime that the doctor was becoming a trifle indis-

creet, and as he was not inclined to trust him with his secret, he replied carelessly: "I am going to try a horse which will be brought to me at half-past two, in the Allée de Longchamps."

"If you like riding, you and Madame Yalta will agree perfectly. She leaps with a rashness that would make the boldest fox-hunters of England and Ireland turn pale, and easily conquers the most restive steeds."

"She may break her neck at that sport."

"It is as a provision for such an emergency that she keeps me by her. I am a surgeon rather than a physician."

"I was aware of that, but I did not know that you formed part of her household."

"No, that would be saying rather too much. It wouldn't suit me to live in her house and follow her in her mad excursions, nor could I neglect my other patients; but the countess will have no one but me. Not because I am more learned than my brother practitioners, but because I am less grave and pompous. She has a horror of men who wear white cravats in the morning; and, besides, we are almost compatriots."

"How is that? Did you not tell me that she was born in Turkey?"

"Yes; but we Hungarians are closely allied to the Turks, in the sense that we have no love for Russia. In the late war my country came very near espousing the Sultan's cause, and for a time I was strongly tempted to serve under Osman Pasha."

"Did the countess command a battalion of Amazons in the army that defended Plevna?"

"Not that I am aware of," the doctor answered, laughing; "but she would be quite capable of making war if the whim seized her. At present, however, she only thinks of peaceful diversions."

"Upon my word, doctor, you are inspiring me with a frantic desire to meet her, and I am ready to follow you as soon as you have finished your cigar."

"I will finish it on the way. We will go now, if you like—at least as soon as we can get a cab."

Five minutes later the pair were rolling swiftly along the Boulevard Haussmann in a cab. The sky was heavily overcast; a great deal of snow had fallen the evening before, and it still fell at intervals.

"It is probable that Madame Martineau will refuse to accompany her pupil to the Bois in such weather," thought Maxime, "and I don't think Alice would venture to go alone. So much the better; Carnoël will be angry with her for failing to come, and I shall have less difficulty in persuading him to go off for good. This young man must cross the seas."

"Didn't you tell me that your uncle was the countess's banker?" M. Villagos suddenly inquired.

"Yes. I believe she has a large amount deposited with him."

"She certainly could not have it in safer hands."

"The firm is not, perhaps, of the highest rank, but it is solid, and foreigners know it, for my uncle has depositors from all countries, particularly Russia. Have you ever heard of a Colonel Borisoff?"

"Yes. I have heard him spoken of in not very complimentary terms. It is said that he is one of the agents of the Russian Government."

"A spy, in other words."

"That term is rather too strong, perhaps. Colonel Borisoff holds a high position in the Imperial army, and is a man of immense wealth. It

would be better to say that he has received a secret mission from his government."

"The Countess Yalta must know him."

"By sight, perhaps, but not otherwise, I assure you. She naturally looks upon this Russian as an enemy. Besides, he has a haughty and, at the same time, crafty manner, and the countess is as unassuming as she is frank. But here we are. That wall encloses the garden of her residence."

The carriage drew up before a small gate in the wall the doctor had pointed out, which gate was evidently intended for the use of the countess's intimate friends and servants, for it was not large enough to admit carriages. The principal courtyard and front of the house were on the other side, on a street running parallel with the Avenue de Friedland.

"It is evident that you are one of the favoured few," remarked Maxime, gaily. "The people she invites to her entertainments don't make use of this entrance, I presume."

"I use it to avoid loss of time; the countess has authorised me to do so. Had we gone in at the main entrance we should have been obliged to file by a long row of footmen, while by entering at this side-door we escape all tiresome ceremony, and go straight to the mistress of the house."

"You know where to find her, I see."

"Not exactly, but I know where to look for her."

The doctor rang three times, the gate opened, and they entered. They had no sooner passed in than the gate closed again.

"This establishment is arranged like a theatre," thought Maxime. "The doors and gates open and shut of their own accord. An excellent mode of eliminating the troublesome race of porters. And, upon my word, here is a regular park!"

It was indeed a park, with old elms growing in luxuriant freedom, and a grass sward extending as far as the eye could reach. In the distance, Maxime discerned a huge conservatory, and nearer, a large house, constructed in an irregular but charming style. "The cage is as peculiar as the bird that occupies it," he said, in a subdued tone. "It must have been built expressly for the countess."

"Yes," replied the doctor, "the house has two aspects. It is an English villa in the rear, and a palace in front. When you go out through the main entrance, you will see that Madame Yalta is lodged like a queen, and that her residence would not look out of place at Versailles. But it is snowing hard again; let us go in."

It surprised Maxime to see and hear M. Villagos talk and act in this way. The doctor had always seemed to him an idle, good-natured man, who divided his time between theatre-going and whist-playing. It was said at the club that the Hungarian was a philosopher, exiled for political reasons, but an exile who had had the foresight to transfer his money to a foreign country before exposing himself to the danger of being expelled by his government. Now, however, Maxime learned that M. Villagos devoted all his time to his patients, that he was the chosen physician of a great lady, and that this great lady held his skill in high esteem. In his eyes the doctor had risen a hundred per cent. within the past hour.

M. Villagos seemed perfectly at home in Madame Yalta's princely establishment, and Maxime was surprised that the doctor's connection with this fashionable lady were not more generally known. It is true that the doctor was modest and discreet, and that he never boasted of his successes. In conversation, he seldom departed from the subjects usually

discussed in assemblies of fashionable men; but even on these subjects he rarely expressed a decided opinion. No one could have told what he thought, much less what he was doing, outside of his profession. We must add, however, that no one troubled himself much about it, M. Villagos being one of those persons one likes to meet without feeling any desire for an intimate acquaintance. He conducted Maxime along the winding paths that led through the luxuriant shrubbery to the ivy-covered house, and into a vestibule that resembled a conservatory, being crowded with flowers and exotic plants. There was no one there to receive visitors, the servants being probably at the main entrance, as M. Villagos had said. "I think it probable that the countess is in the billiard-room," the doctor remarked to Maxime.

"She plays billiards!"

"She plays all sorts of games, and excels in them, too. Do you know she has a professor of chess connected with her establishment?"

"What! chess, too!"

"Yes, indeed. I am a fair player, but she can beat me."

"I begin to understand why she has no lovers. She lacks time. But where are you taking me, my dear doctor? One would think one's-self in a museum, by these long galleries lined with pictures and statues."

"The interior of this building has been arranged in such a way as to enable the countess to gratify her tastes. It contains a covered riding hall, a fencing room, and a pistol gallery; and as she worships art, painting and statuary have also found a place here."

"And is there no one to guard all these wonders? This is very like the enchanted castle of the Sleeping Beauty."

"You are mistaken. The countess never sleeps, and, to prove it, listen," said the doctor, pausing before a stained-glass door. Maxime complied, and heard a very significant sound, the clash of steel. "She is practising with her fencing-master," resumed M. Villagos. "Do you like the exercise?"

"Very much; I can handle a foil very fairly."

"Capital! the countess will be delighted to display her skill before a competent judge."

Maxime was about to protest, as it seemed quite out of place to present a perfect stranger to a lady while she was engaged in taking a fencing lesson, but the doctor at once opened the door, pushed him into the room, and entered after him. So Maxime at last found himself in the presence of this singular creature who had engrossed his thoughts all the morning.

She had her face masked and wore a fencing costume, comprising a buckskin jacket, black leather leggings, velvet knickerbockers, and sandals and gloves. In such a costume it was difficult to judge of her beauty. One could only see that she was tall and slender, the mask revealing merely a white throat of irreproachable outline. "Good morning, doctor," she said, without seeming to notice Maxime, and without pausing in her exercise. "I will be at your service in a moment. Give me time to touch Kardiki, who contests the last stroke."

The Polish professor, after a lively round, received the button of the countess's foil full in the breast, and acknowledged his defeat by saluting her with his weapon.

"You cannot deny that one," exclaimed Madame Yalta. "That is the fifth time this morning; to-morrow I will make up the dozen. That is enough for to-day; leave us."

The well-trained subordinate retired without a word.

"Good morning, countess," now remarked the physician; "I am glad to see that your rheumatism does not interfere with your fencing."

"You know I am an advocate of violent treatment. I am still suffering, however, but fortunately it is in the left arm. Have you brought a remedy? I must be cured in three days." As she spoke, the countess removed her mask, and Maxime was rather surprised than charmed when he saw the face it had hidden. It was a strange countenance, with a still stranger expression. The skin was a dead white, the mouth rather too large, the lips full and red, the chin a trifle prominent, the nose straight like those of the Greek statues, the forehead low and surrounded by curls of light-coloured hair, the *tout ensemble* being scarcely pleasing at first sight. The countess's eyes were of an undefinable tint; sometimes they seemed as blue as myosotis, sometimes as green as the angry sea, sometimes as grey as the winter sky. Indeed, they seemed to change in colour with each thought they reflected. Her expression, too, was indescribable, mysterious, and at the same time sensual, as with certain portraits of Byzantine saints.

Maxime was amazed. There is no greater creature of habit than a Parisian man of fashion, and Maxime, like most of his associates, only admired two or three different types of women. The brunette of the skating-rink represented one variety conceded to be worthy of homage, since Alfred de Musset had sung the praises of Andalusian women; but the countess puzzled Maxime. He vaguely felt that there was nothing commonplace about her, and that by studying her more carefully he should discover the charm which M. Villagos had alluded to, though as yet he did not feel its power.

"You have only to follow my prescription," said the doctor. "I have recommended exercise and diversion. Fencing is excellent, and what is still better, I have brought you the gayest and most entertaining of my friends, Monsieur Maxime Dorgères."

Maxime tried to find some appropriate remark, but failing to do so, merely bowed rather awkwardly.

"You are welcome, sir," said the countess. "The doctor's friends are mine. Are you a relative of Monsieur Dorgères, the banker?"

"I am his nephew, madame."

"Then you are no stranger to me. I know him, and am indebted to him for taking into his employ a lad in whom I feel an interest."

"Georget, I presume," said Maxime, glad to find a topic of conversation that set him at ease.

"I see that you know him."

"I see him whenever I go to my uncle's, and I am happy to tell you, madame, that the lad has rendered me a service for which I am deeply grateful."

"Indeed! What service could such a mere child have rendered you?"

"He saved my life by furnishing me with a means of escape from some men who intended to rob me."

"And his father saved my father's life! It seems to run in the blood."

"My uncle told me something to that effect, and it was this that emboldened me to follow the doctor when he offered to bring me here. I hoped that you would excuse me for availing myself of the opportunity to speak to you about Georget Piriac, your little *protégé*."

"Oh, my protection has, so far, not been of much benefit to him. I

thought I was doing him a service in placing him with your uncle, but I have since discovered that the lad is remarkably clever, and I don't wish him to spend his life in carrying letters. I think of providing him with a better situation."

"His grandmother wishes him to be a soldier. She has probably told you so?"

"No. I knew her address, and when I came to Paris I sent my steward to ask her to send little Georget to me, which she did, but she did not see fit to honour me with a visit."

"She is a very extraordinary woman."

"You have seen her, then?"

"Yes, I was there this morning, and I am still wondering if she is not a princess disguised as a concierge. She takes charge of an old house at Batignolles with all the majesty of a queen."

"That perhaps explains why she did not deign to trouble herself to thank me. But enough of Master Georget. Do you fence?"

"Sometimes."

"Then you won't refuse to give me a lesson. I am going to send Kardiki away shortly, for he can teach me nothing more; but I hope you will beat me."

Maxime did not know what to say in response to such an unexpected proposal, for he had certainly not come to cross swords with Madame Yalta. However, the doctor kindly endeavoured to relieve him of his embarrassment. "I have recommended exercise, countess," he said, "but you must not abuse it. An hour's fencing is more than enough for a person with rheumatism."

"I am not tired. See, doctor, my pulse is as regular as if I had just risen," she said, extending a slender hand encased in a long nine-button glove.

"My dear madame, how can I hope to cure you if you don't obey my instructions? Besides, you see that my friend Dorgères is not in fencing costume."

"What does that matter? He would oblige me by putting on a mask and gloves; nothing more is needed. In one or two rounds I shall learn his play."

Maxime felt that there was no escape. The countess was watching him with her clear eyes, and he began to understand how impossible it would be to resist those eyes, and he no longer thought her ugly. So he obeyed with fairly good grace, and after equipping himself with the mask and gloves he had taken down from the wall, he placed himself before the countess, who was already prepared for him.

"Thanks," she said; "I see that you know how to yield gracefully to a lady's caprice." And without further preamble she attacked him.

Maxime had regained his self-possession. He was not sorry to display his skill before this Amazon, who considered herself invincible. He suspected that the Polish professor had allowed himself to be worsted merely out of deference to his wealthy pupil. But he soon discovered his mistake. Madame Yalta had a peculiar method that disconcerted him considerably. It seemed to him at times that he was competing with a left-handed opponent, and though he tried to defend himself, after a few skilful thrusts he was touched. "I surrender, madame," he said, lowering his foil, and sincerely hoping the lesson would end there.

"No, no," exclaimed the countess, "that thrust does not count. You

haven't had time to become accustomed to my attacks. We haven't studied in the same school. Your style is much more regular than mine, and in the long run you would get the advantage of me. Let us go on."

She again placed herself on guard, and Maxime was obliged to do the same. This time he calculated his feints and thrusts with great care, with the intention of tiring his fair adversary, who attacked with too much ardour to hold out long. But all his calculations were frustrated by chance. In the most critical part of the engagement, Madame Yalta's foil grazed Maxime's wrist and caught in the sleeve of his coat. She quickly withdrew it, but there was an instant's delay, for the foil had also caught in the bracelet, which fell to the floor as the countess forcibly released the foil.

Maxime was so surprised that he forgot to retaliate, and the countess threw aside her mask, exclaiming—"Have I wounded you, sir?"

"No, it isn't that," stammered the young man.

"His heart is wounded, perhaps," laughed the doctor. "Countess, your foil has torn from Monsieur Dorgères a bracelet that looks very much like a love-token."

As he spoke he picked it up and handed it to his noble patient.

Maxime had also unmasked, and wondered: "If she is going to ask me to give it to her, like the brunette at the skating-rink, what the deuce shall I do then!"

The countess was examining the ornament. "Was this a gift from a lady?" she asked.

"You would not believe me if I told you I had bought it from a jeweller," replied Maxime, forcing a smile.

"And this lady made you swear to wear it?"

"No," he answered, awkwardly.

"Then allow me to give you some advice. Preserve the bracelet carefully, but do not expose yourself again to the danger of losing it. I have it now, what would you do if I kept it?"

The poor fellow made an effort, and an inspiration coming to him, he said: "If you kept it, madame, I should have a right to think the confiscation equivalent to a declaration on your part. To show a man that you are jealous of his past is equivalent to an acknowledgment that you love him."

The countess started, and a strange light gleamed in her eyes. She still held the bracelet, and did not seem inclined to relinquish it. Maxime was on thorns, though he tried to appear unconcerned. The doctor was watching Madame Yalta, and seemed to take a lively interest in this little scene.

"You are right, sir," the countess replied at last. "You might deceive yourself; and, to prove that I care for no one, here is your bracelet."

No entreaties were needed to induce Maxime to place it in his pocket; and M. Villagos remarked, in a semi-jocular tone—"Really, countess, you are too kind. I know many women who would have made their conditions before returning it. Had I been in your place I should have made Monsieur Dorgères promise to come every day for a month and give me a fencing or a riding lesson."

"That would be a pleasant obligation," exclaimed Maxime, who had recovered his spirits.

"I take you at your word," said the countess, quickly; "and I hope you will become a real friend. You are one already, are you not?"

Maxime replied by an earnest gesture. "Then," continued the lady, with a smile well calculated to turn a steadier head than that of the banker's nephew, "you will accompany me to the Bois. They say that the lakes are frozen, and I long to skate."

"I beg your pardon," said Maxime, who was greatly embarrassed. "Under any other circumstances I should be delighted to accompany you, but to-day I have an appointment which I must not fail to keep."

"With the donor of the bracelet?"

"No, I assure you; but ——"

"The meeting-place is in the Bois. He told me so," interrupted the doctor.

"Then you no longer have any excuse for refusing," remarked Madame Yalta; "and I shall never forgive you if you allow me to go alone. I will order the sleigh, you will enter it with me, we will drive to the lake, and you shall leave me whenever you please. It is decided, is it not? You belong to me—for an hour. Doctor, please take Monsieur Dorgères into the library and entertain him while I dress. It will not take me long."

Maxime again attempted to protest, but she hastened away, leaving him alone with M. Villagos, who asked, without any preparation: "Well, what do you think of my patient?"

"I begin to think her charming."

"Which means that you at first thought her ugly. The countess never attracts one at first sight, but in a quarter of an hour she charms any intelligent man. I call it reaction. But what is much more rare is for them to please her; and I am certain that you have pleased her very much. I read it in her eyes."

As he spoke the genial doctor led the way to the library, down a long passage which ended in a hall, shut off by a *portière* of Gobelins tapestry, beside which stood a zealous servant, who hastened to raise it at the first sound of their footsteps. The man was a giant, six feet high, broad in proportion, and bearded like the Farnese Hercules. Gorgeons in gold lace and gimp, his appearance was calculated to inspire respect. An unsophisticated *bourgeois* would have bowed low to him, but, on the contrary, it was he who humbly saluted the doctor, and stood aside to let him pass. M. Villagos had not exaggerated in declaring that the countess lived in a palace, to which the villa was like an antechamber.

Beyond that *portière* everything was characterised by the greatest splendour. There was a long suite of reception-rooms, all wonderfully adorned, and at each door stood a footman in a gorgeous livery of blue and gold. Awed despite himself, Maxime only regained the power of speech when he found himself in a spacious gallery lined with richly-bound volumes. "Here I know myself," he exclaimed. "We are in Paris, in the house of a rich and cultured lady. While admiring the magnificence of the apartments we have just passed through, I wondered if I were not about to enter the presence of Louis XIV. seated on his throne."

"You understand now why Madame Yalta prefers her English house," replied the doctor. "This splendour is necessitated by her wealth, but she escapes from it whenever she can. This part of the house is only used for formal receptions four or five times in the winter, when all Paris is invited."

"All Paris is rather vague. I know that men belonging to the highest circles attend her *fêtes*, but who are her lady friends?"

"Foreigners principally, but she has never made any attempt to form the acquaintance of Russian ladies. The aristocracy of both hemispheres consider it an honour to dance in her *salons*, and you can meet many heiresses there. I hope you will marry one worth a million at least."

"Thanks, doctor, I expect to end my days in celibacy. But, upon my word, here is a sleigh wonderfully equipped!"

The windows of the library overlooked the spacious courtyard, where stood a sleigh drawn by three horses—one in the shafts, under a high-arched collar, and the other two driven tandem by a coachman enveloped in furs, and imported like all the rest of the turn-out from the banks of the Neva. The horses neighed, and the bells tinkled, and Maxime, who looked on, exclaimed: "Zounds! I should have regretted all my life not having shown myself in the Bois in this unrivalled equipage, beside the most elegant woman in Paris."

His remarks were interrupted by the entrance of the countess, who appeared transformed.

She wore a sealskin cap on her head, and was enveloped in a long blue fox pelisse, and Maxime this time thought her bewilderingly beautiful. The blood had mounted to her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled with extraordinary brilliancy. One would have thought she had a fever.

"Take care, madame," said the doctor, struck by this sudden change. "The air is very keen and your horses are very difficult to manage. You have not yet entirely recovered, and too much fatigue might bring on a relapse. Indeed, I think it would be wiser for you to abandon the drive." This advice was given in a more serious tone than Dr. Villagos had previously used in speaking to his noble patient, but it was not followed.

"If I have a relapse you shall set me on my feet again once more, my dear doctor," said the countess, gaily; "and besides, I feel a conviction that a drive in the cold will do me an immense amount of good. The trip to Monaco having failed, I mean to try a turn in the Bois. Who loves me follows me," she added, with a glance at Maxime.

And Maxime followed, though he did not yet love her in the strict sense of the word. It was almost an act of heroism on his part, for his only wrapping was an ordinary overcoat, and he was certain to catch a bad cold; but when once fairly started this seeker after adventures recognised no obstacles. Having bidden farewell to Dr Villagos, who pressed his hand warmly, he went down into the courtyard with the countess, and took a seat beside her in the sleigh. The coachman handed his mistress the reins and the whip, sprang behind, and the equipage started off.

"Well," said the countess, when she had the horses—frisky at first—fully under control, "we can talk now. Tell me something about your uncle, my banker."

Maxime had not expected this beginning, and did not know what to answer.

"He has a daughter?" resumed Madame Yalta.

"Yes, madame."

"A very charming girl, I thought. I saw her one day in the Champs Elysées, leaning on Monsieur Dorgères' arm. How is it that she is still unmarried?"

"I don't know. She is only nineteen."

"You must be in love with her."

"Not in the least, I assure you."

"Then perhaps I can ask if what Georget told me is true?"

"What did he tell you?"

"That she was in love with one of your uncle's clerks."

"What! the young rascal has ventured——"

"You mustn't be angry with him. It is my fault. I have sometimes amused myself by making him prattle. Yesterday, not knowing what else to do, I sent for him to come and tell me whether he was satisfied with his situation or not. In fact, I only desired amusement, and I found it. He is very observing, and, thanks to him, I gained considerable knowledge of your uncle's household; more than you possess, I daresay; for Georget tells me that you do not visit there very often. However, he gave me such an enthusiastic description of Mademoiselle Dorgères that I feel an intense desire to invite her to my next ball."

"My cousin goes out very little, and I fear——"

"That my invitation would not be accepted. If that is the case, I shall call on her father and ask him to introduce me to her. But that was not all. Georget described the old governess so perfectly that it seems to me I have known her all my life. He also mentioned the cashier, an excellent young man, and the secretary—a Breton scion of nobility—whom your uncle dismissed a few days ago. Why did he send him away?"

"I don't exactly know," replied Maxime, more and more disconcerted. "I think Monsieur de Carnoël resigned his position. My uncle wished to send him to Egypt, and as he did not care to go so far away he resigned."

"Carnoël," repeated the countess; "the name seems familiar to me. Wasn't there formerly an *attaché* of that name at the French embassy at St. Petersburg?"

"That *attaché* was Robert de Carnoël's father."

"Then how does it happen that the son——"

"Has accepted a position as secretary to a banker? Because his father left him no fortune."

"And the son is a courageous youth who doesn't fear to work to regain his position! Is he good-looking?"

"Very good-looking; not handsome, but very distinguished and intelligent in appearance. I am only slightly acquainted with him, however."

"I really don't know why I ask all these questions. You must think me very intrusive."

"Not at all," protested Maxime, who, however, did not say what he really thought.

"Oh, I feel that my curiosity is inexcusable, but pray don't be offended. I am only inquisitive with my friends, and though our acquaintance dates merely from to-day, I cannot help imagining that you are my friend."

Maxime mumbled a commonplace compliment, to which she paid no attention.

"Would you like to know," she said, "why I weary you with questions about your cousin and your uncle's secretary? Well, after listening to Georget's stories, I fancied that Mademoiselle Dorgères loved this Monsieur de Carnoël, and that he also loved her."

Maxime flushed on hearing this.

"Ah, I see that I was right," exclaimed the countess, "and now I'm certain that the two lovers are suffering martyrdom because your uncle has parted them. If that is the case, do you know what I propose to do? You may say I have no common-sense, but I intend to take your cousin's part, find Monsieur de Carnoël, and plead his cause with Monsieur Dorgères. Absurd, is it not?"

"No," replied Maxime, quickly, "only you are misinformed. If I thought my cousin would be happy as Monsieur de Carnoël's wife, I would myself do what you propose. But I am compelled to tell you that you would act wrongly in interesting yourself in this young man."

"Why? Has he been guilty of anything dishonourable?"

"I did not say that," replied Maxime, who was already blaming himself for having said too much.

"He is accused of it, perhaps? What is he accused of?"

"Of nothing; but his conduct is singular, to say the least. He went away without a word of farewell to his best friend, Jules Vignory, and cannot be found. A person whose conscience is clear doesn't act like that."

The countess made a movement that was felt by the three horses she was driving, for they suddenly swerved on one side, and, to Maxime's great surprise, she made no further allusion to the subject she had been the first to broach.

They were now in the Bois, and in a few minutes they reached the lake, on and about which a crowd of skaters and sightseers had already assembled, and, just as the countess checked her horses, Maxime saw a lady approaching the bank. He could scarcely restrain an exclamation of surprise, for he recognised her as the brunette of the skating rink. She wore the same costume as on the previous occasion, and made no attempt whatever at concealment, for she did not even take the trouble to lower her veil. So she had told him an untruth in declaring that she was going to leave Paris for a fortnight, and Maxime felt a strong desire to ask for an explanation of this falsehood as well as of several others. However, the brunette had probably not recognised him, for she passed the sleigh without turning her head, and leisurely descended the bank.

"Well," said the countess, "what do you think? It isn't very pleasant to skate in the midst of such a crowd; but I doubt if the skating club is yet organised on the Lake of Madrid, and if you like the exercise which I am so passionately fond of, we might try it here. But, by the way, at what hour is your appointment, and where?"

"At three o'clock, on the Route des Bouleaux."

"That is some distance from here, but if you will take a single turn with me on the ice I will drive you there. But no," she added, laughing; "you would probably prefer to go alone, for I hardly believe what the doctor said about your trying a horse. Well, then, you can leave me in twenty minutes, and my coachman shall take you where you wish to go, and return here to wait for me. I promised you that you should be free, and I always keep my promises."

Maxime was about to accept this offer when he saw his uncle's berline approaching. It was a substantial but plain vehicle, drawn by two quiet horses and driven by a coachman who did not seem to be very well acquainted with his business. "I really believe that is Joseph, with the coachman's great-coat over his livery," Maxime murmured, "and Alice is inside. Obstinate little thing, she has come in spite of everybody and in spite of the weather. If I don't interfere, heaven only knows what will take place between my cousin and Robert de Carnoël."

"I am waiting," said the countess, impatiently.

"I beg your pardon, madame," stammered Maxime; "I thought I recognised in that carriage——"

"Mademoiselle Dorgères," finished the countess, who had glanced at the vehicle. "Yes, it is she, and she has recognised us."

The windows were open, and Alice's golden head showed itself for a moment, but speedily disappeared. Joseph had also seen his master's nephew, and he whipped up his horses at once. Maxime now displayed no little heroism. "Madame," he said, without further hesitation, "to my great regret I am obliged to leave you."

"To follow that young girl, I suspect."

"No; but——"

"Why do you try to prevaricate? It is evident that the person you are to meet at the Route des Bouleaux is Mademoiselle Dorgères. If you walk, she will arrive there before you, and that would be extremely annoying, the more so as you would have to explain why you were driving with me instead of being at the rendezvous."

"On the contrary, I swear that my cousin is not expecting me, and I am going——"

"You are going to atone for your delinquencies, and in this way. My horses move rather faster than your uncle's, so we can take another road, and I will drop you near the Route des Bouleaux at any spot you may indicate, and then drive away without once looking behind me."

The countess did not give him time to object. She touched her horses and they flew off like the wind. "This time it is an abduction," exclaimed Maxime, with a forced laugh.

"A very disinterested one on my part," said the countess, rather drily. "I am bearing you to the feet of the woman you love."

"I deny it; Mademoiselle Dorgères is my cousin, and nothing more."

"I defy you to prove it. If you didn't love her you wouldn't be so eager to join her."

"I am not the one who loves her."

"Do you think you can make me believe that you came to this rendezvous in the interest of one of your friends?"

"No; I come, on the contrary, to prevent a meeting I dread."

"You must explain yourself more clearly if you wish me to understand."

The horses were going at a tremendous pace, and the swift motion bewildered Maxime, already rather confused by Madame Yalta's strange questions. She acted as if she were really jealous of him, and his vanity being flattered, he decided, after considerable hesitation, to convince her that his heart did not belong to his cousin. "Ah, well, madame," he began, "I must explain that Mademoiselle Dorgères fancies herself in love with a young man whom I do not consider worthy of her. This secret does not belong to me, and if I confide it to you it is because I feel certain that you will not abuse it."

"This young man is Monsieur de Carnoël, is it not?"

Maxime started, but he had gone too far to draw back. "You are right," he murmured.

"But what can have made you think that Monsieur de Carnoël is unworthy of Mademoiselle Dorgères?"

"He left my uncle's house under very unfortunate circumstances."

"Then how is it that he is still in Paris?"

"I think he remained in order to see my cousin again. He wrote her word that he would wait for her to-day in the Bois de Boulogne. She showed me the letter. However, the interview will take place in the presence of her governess, so the consequences will not be very serious. But I have resolved to be present, and speak to Carnoël in a way that will

prevent him from making any further attempts of this kind. Now, madame, you know all."

There was a pause. To Maxime's surprise the countess seemed greatly disturbed, but at last she said—"You are the most honest man I have ever met, sir, and it depends only upon yourself to become one of my best friends. Here is the Allée de Longchamps. The Route des Bouleaux is close by. I set you at liberty, but I count upon seeing you to-morrow—and I will not receive you in my armoury," she added, gaily. "After three o'clock the Countess Yalta will be at home to Monsieur Maxime Dorgères, and to him alone."

Then she checked her horses, the sleigh stopped, and Maxime alighted, eagerly assuring her that he would not fail to avail himself of the honour so graciously offered. The countess did not wait to listen to his compliments, but drove swiftly down the Allée de Longchamps, until the equipage turned to the right and disappeared. Maxime stood for a moment trying to collect his thoughts. He felt very much as if he had fallen from a balloon. The incidents which had followed his breakfast at Tortoni's all crowded upon his mind, and bewildered him to such a degree that he scarcely knew where he was. "A quarter to three," he said at last, drawing out his watch. "Carnoël must be at his post before this. I see nothing of the carriage, and by hurrying a little I shall have time to say a few words to that gentleman before Alice appears upon the scene."

In ten minutes he reached the appointed spot, but to his great astonishment he did not find his uncle's ex-secretary there. "This is certainly the place," he murmured, looking at the guide-post at the intersection of the two roads, "and not the least sign of Carnoël. It's incomprehensible. The idea of Alice being obliged to wait for this gentleman; but upon my word, I'm not sorry. She will see that he is only making game of her, and she will be more inclined to listen to the sermon I am going to read her. As for Carnoël, he has probably changed his mind and left Paris. He concluded that he would gain nothing by his interview, and the brougham in which I saw him this morning was undoubtedly conveying him to the Northern Railway Station. To ride about in such an elegant equipage, Master Robert must have very wealthy friends, that is to say, accomplices."

These reflections were interrupted by the approach of the berline, and fearing that Joseph might apprise his young mistress of her cousin's presence, Maxime stepped back into the shrubbery. The carriage drove slowly up to the cross-roads. Alice put her head out of the window, and Maxime emerging from his hiding-place, deliberately advanced. "It is I," he said. "Good morning, Madame Martineau; good morning, Alice; don't be angry, I beg, but listen to me."

Alice was very pale, and her governess wore an air of consternation that would have excited Maxime's mirth under any other circumstances. Joseph, too, seemed ill at ease, and tried to conceal his face in the fur collar of his overcoat. "You come from him?" asked Alice, in an agitated voice. "You have seen him, then?"

"I come from no one," replied Maxime, trying to look grave and affectionate at the same time. "Like you, I expected to find Monsieur de Carnoël here, and it was to him especially that I wished to speak. But he has not come, and he will not come!"

"Then some misfortune has befallen him!" exclaimed the girl.

"Not to my knowledge; but he has probably good reasons for not

showing himself. You ask me if I have seen him? Yes, I have seen him, but I have not spoken to him. I saw him this morning in an elegant carriage, drawn by two superb horses. He, too, saw me, and seemed greatly annoyed at meeting me, for he did his best to conceal himself in the depths of his luxurious equipage."

"Where could he have been going?" murmured Alice, as if talking to herself.

"Who knows? Perhaps to take the train."

"Impossible! He solemnly promised that he would not go away without seeing me."

"He may have changed his mind, or rather—— Would you know my real opinion? Yes! Then I think this man does not deserve that you should sacrifice yourself for him. I cannot swear that he is guilty of the crime he has been accused of, but his conduct certainly authorises the most unfavourable conjectures. What is to be thought of a man who rolls about in carriages in order to conceal himself the more effectively? We all know that he was poor when he left your father's employ. You will say that the brougham was not his. Perhaps not; but to whom does it belong? I never knew that he had any rich friends, and it is only since he lost his position that Monsieur de Carnoël has suddenly found himself connected with millionaires, so there is certainly abundant ground for suspicion in this sudden change of fortune. I read in Madame Martineau's face that she perfectly agrees with me."

The governess thus called upon, concluded that this was a favourable moment for the expression of her sentiments. "My dear Alice," she began, "I think your cousin is right. I consented to accompany you, because it was not seemly for you to come alone to an interview appointed by Monsieur de Carnoël, and because you promised me to tell your father everything this evening; but I hope that you are now sufficiently enlightened concerning the moral character of this young man, and that you will compromise yourself no further on his account."

Alice was looking alternately at Maxime and the Route des Bouleaux, where no one was to be seen. "Swear that you believe him guilty," she said to her cousin, after a long pause.

"Upon my word of honour, I believe it," Maxime replied, unhesitatingly.

Alice's face was ghastly pale, but she conquered her emotion, and firmly replied: "You have just pronounced my sentence. I shall submit uncomplainingly. Tell Joseph to take me home."

Maxime did not need to be told twice. He had not expected that Alice would yield so quickly, and he did not intend to give her time to reconsider so wise a resolution. "Believe me, my dear," he said, pressing her hand affectionately, "if you would always be happy follow your father's advice." Then he called out to the pretended coachman—"Rue de Suresnes, Joseph. These ladies wish to return."

Joseph did not understand the meaning of all this, but he obeyed, and the berline went on its way.

"I have just performed a commendable action," thought Maxime. "My cousin must now be pretty nearly cured of that passion. Now my conscience is clear in this respect, and I can look after my own affairs a little. The brunette of the rink may still be upon the lake. I will hasten there at once."

He started off at a furious pace, but it was not so much the brunette

as the countess that he hoped to find. But his race and his search proved unavailing; Madame Sergent was no longer there, and the sleigh had disappeared. Vexed, and benumbed with cold, Maxime was compelled to abandon his chase after pretty women; and, to complete his discomfiture, he had to walk as far as the Arc de Triomphe on account of his failure to find any vacant vehicle. That day, at least, virtue went unrewarded.

VIII.

WHILE Maxime Dorgères was waiting for his cousin Alice at the corner of the Route des Bouleaux, Robert de Carnoël was striding up and down the gallery in which he was confined. No one had come to disturb his solitude since M. Borisoff had disappeared through the secret door, and he had had abundant time to reflect upon the position into which a strange fatality had forced him. It was a frightful situation; the more so, as there seemed to be no remedy, for the colonel would unquestionably detain him indefinitely—keep him until the torture of a prolonged imprisonment forced him to confess what he was determined to deny, or else deliver him up to the authorities. And whichever course this unscrupulous Russian decided to adopt, Robert felt that he was lost, for he knew that Alice would certainly regard him as guilty if he did not appear before her to exonerate himself.

What would he not have given for an hour of liberty! Gladly would he have risked his life ten times over to have kept his appointment in the Bois de Boulogne, but he had not even the consolation of attempting a perilous escape. A man cannot escape from a house arranged like that of Colonel Borisoff, and from a jailer who has but a single prisoner to guard—above all, when this jailer has a personal interest in detaining his prisoner, and is aided by numerous and devoted subordinates. The doors of the library were certainly locked, and closely watched from the outside; the windows, fifteen feet from the floor, seemed inaccessible, and even if one managed to reach them they must look out upon the garden of the house, a garden enclosed by high walls. Robert felt that it would be impossible to overcome these obstacles, and when three o'clock struck he was in despair. All was over. Alice was lost to him. What did it matter now if he ended his days in captivity? He threw himself on a divan near the fireplace, and fell into that torpor which so often follows mental crises.

Night had come when the sound of opening doors aroused him from his stupor. Two servants entered by one of the apertures formed by the movable panels in the woodwork; two stalwart men, who looked like soldiers in the Russian army, and who carried a well-spread table. Robert sprang up and opened his lips to tell them to leave him undisturbed, but a moment's reflection deterred him. He remembered that these men were executing an order, that they probably did not understand French, and that if they did understand him they must have orders not to answer him, so he concluded not to waste words upon them.

We must also admit that he was dying of hunger, having eaten nothing since he took his cup of chocolate at nine o'clock that morning. What use would it be to refuse the dinner? Sooner or later, he would be obliged to yield to those physical cravings which the most violent mental agitations are not able to overcome. So he resigned himself, and made no attempt to

prevent the Muscovite valets from placing the table in front of the fire. While they were performing this duty, two others set up a comfortable camp bedstead, provided with excellent mattresses and heavy coverlets. Robert noticed that they also brought in a night lamp and a variety of toilet accessories. The colonel had forgotten nothing. "He thinks that I shall remain his prisoner for a long time," muttered Robert, "but he is mistaken. I must make my escape or die."

"Monsieur le Marquis is served," said the servant who performed the duties of steward with perfect gravity.

Robert had never assumed this title, although it was rightfully his; and he was considerably astonished when he heard the man thus address him. "This Borisoff knows I am a marquis," he thought. "This is strange." But he did not choose to ask an explanation of a lackey, so he seated himself as deliberately as if he had been invited to a friend's table.

The dinner was naturally served *à la Russe*. Beside Robert's plate there was a *menu* which he did not care to examine, and an array of glasses of all sizes and shapes. However, M. de Carnoël did little honour to the colonel's excellent *cuisine*, and scarcely tasted his wines, which were of superb quality. He ate, but only enough to recruit his strength, and that accomplished he rose without a word to his attendants. They understood, and in the twinkling of an eye the table was replaced by a large stand holding a large samovar and all the accessories. The mutes of a seraglio could not have performed their duties more silently. Robert, still impassible, allowed them to depart, and was once more left alone in the immense apartment which served as his prison. The fire crackled, the candles flickered, the water sang blithely in the copper kettle, and the pleasant and penetrating smell of tea perfumed the atmosphere. Nothing was wanting in this princely interior, which seemed especially arranged for dreams of hope and happiness, and Robert thought bitterly that for him hope and happiness had fled for ever.

Just at that moment the colonel entered by the secret door reserved for his use. He seemed to be as calm as M. de Carnoël was agitated, and advanced towards him with a smile upon his lips. "Good evening, sir," he said, affably. "I hope that you have no cause to complain of my people, and that you will excuse me for having left you so long alone. I have had important business to attend to to-day; business which has detained me until now, but I don't forget that you are my guest, and that my duty as a host obliges me to entertain you. I am going out this evening, but it is not late, and I have come to chat with you while I smoke a cigarette."

Robert was pale with rage. He was trying to find some insult as a response to this insolent politeness, but could find none sufficiently strong. Meanwhile M. Borisoff installed himself comfortably in an arm chair, and began to roll a cigarette of Turkish tobacco. He was in full evening dress, with a white cravat, and all his decorations. "Yes," he resumed, "I am invited to an entertainment given by a merchant prince. He is the banker of our embassy, and I must not neglect to show myself. And yet I detest this sort of thing, and should have remained at home with you, had I not been sure of meeting at the hall some of your acquaintances—Monsieur Dorgères and his charming daughter."

"You will see Monsieur Dorgères," exclaimed Robert. "Do you intend to tell him that you have entrapped me by means that an honourable man would blush to employ?"

The tone was more aggressive than the words, and Robert expected a furious response, but the colonel did not so much as frown. "That will depend entirely upon the result of the conversation we shall have together," he said quietly. "And, first, believe me that it is utterly useless for you to try to involve me in a quarrel with you, for I warn you that you will not succeed. Whatever you may say to me will not make me depart from the calmness I have imposed upon myself. It will cost me no little effort, I confess, to listen to the insults anger may suggest to you. I am not very patient, and under any other circumstances I would not tolerate them. But such important interests are at stake that I wish to control myself, and I warn you that I can do whatever I wish. Now, to return to Monsieur Dorgères. I saw him to-day."

"You have seen him! Then he already knows——"

"He knows nothing. He was not expecting to see me; he was even ignorant that I was in Paris, for he thought I was still in pursuit of you, either in France or some foreign country. I told him that I had failed to find you in Brittany, and that I was certain you had not left Paris, or that if you had left it for a time you would soon return."

"And does he still believe me guilty?"

"He is more firmly convinced of it than ever. He had some doubts at first, but they have left him. However, the question of your guilt is not what most interests him at present. It is of far greater consequence to him that you should not prolong your stay in this city."

"Does he fear that I shall make another attempt to break open his safe?" inquired M. de Carnoël, ironically.

"No; he fears that you will compromise his daughter."

"I have already told you that I forbid you to drag Mademoiselle Dorgères into the affair."

"You forbid me!" repeated the colonel, with a scornful smile. "I alone have the right to give orders here. You must hear me to the end. Formerly I had but a slight acquaintance with Monsieur Dorgères, our connection being only that of banker and depositor; but on the day the robbery was discovered he showed less reserve towards me. Still he did not see fit on that occasion to tell me his reasons for sending you away. I learned these only a few hours ago."

"You inspire him with great confidence, I see," murmured M. de Carnoël, turning pale on hearing the colonel boast of the confidential disclosures Alice's father had made.

"Implicit confidence," replied M. Borisoff. "He is grateful to me for the prudence with which I have conducted an affair that affected him more deeply than I supposed. He has told me that you were in love with Mademoiselle Dorgères, and that you had succeeded in winning her affections, and that having discovered this secret, he at once separated you, so as to put an end to what he considered a most unfortunate affair. Is this true?"

"Perfectly true," was the haughty reply.

"Your frankness is commendable," said the colonel, "and deserves to be rewarded by a full explanation of the present situation. During the days that immediately followed your departure, he concluded you had succeeded in crossing the frontier, and he rejoiced at the failure of the pursuit I had undertaken. He felt that in the interest of his daughter this result was the most desirable that could be attained. I admit that I scarcely agreed with him, and that the loss of my casquet weighed heavily

upon my mind. But we will say no more about that. Monsieur Dorgères believed that he had no further annoyance to apprehend, and so it was with the greatest consternation that he heard of your return to Paris, for like myself he had divined the real cause of this unexpected return. He is certain that you were actuated by a hope of seeing Mademoiselle Dorgères again. She, it seems, is not unwilling to grant you an interview, for truth compels me to admit that she has not forgotten you, and that she still persists in declaring that you are innocent."

"Her father told you that?" exclaimed Rohert, with an emotion he made no attempt to disguise.

"He told me that. You see I am perfectly willing to show you my hand. He hopes that his daughter will change her mind and soon be cured of a love he disapproves of; but he fears she might consent to take some compromising step if she knew that you were here, and he believes that she does know it, and that you have written to her. I am certain that she does, for I have had sufficient proofs of it this very day. Her father told me that she went out with her governess for a drive in the Bois. Now, it is snowing as it snowed on the road from Moscow in 1812, and I was wondering why a young lady should go to the Bois in such weather, when I suddenly remembered that you insisted that I should set you at liberty for a few hours this afternoon. It was not difficult to guess that a desire to see Mademoiselle Dorgères was the cause of this anxiety on your part. Was I mistaken?"

"No!" was the curt reply.

"Very well. Now to return to my argument. Mademoiselle Dorgères went to the place you had appointed, by letter, I suppose. She went there in defiance of her father's wishes. Her love for you must be very strong to induce her to compromise herself."

"But her governess was with her. I myself asked her to let that lady accompany her."

"I am not surprised, for I have never doubted the purity of your intentions as regards Mademoiselle Dorgères. You wish to marry her, and you are right. And what prevents you from doing so? Only a mere trifle. All that is needed is to convince her father that you are not guilty of the crime imputed to you, and that you have been unjustly accused. The day he becomes convinced that you have been the victim of a shameful calumny, he will consider himself bound to atone for the injustice he has done you, and there is but one way in which he can do this—that is to grant you his daughter's hand."

"What do you mean?"

"That it only depends upon me to convert this dream into a reality."

"How, pray?"

"Before answering that question I must remind you that your reputation is still intact in the eyes of the world. The robbery is known only to three or four persons, who are all interested in keeping the unfortunate affair a secret; so, if Monsieur de Carnoël should resume his duties as secretary, after a short absence which could be easily explained, no one would be surprised to learn that he was about to marry Mademoiselle Dorgères. It would not be the first time that rank formed an alliance with wealth."

"You are mistaken. Monsieur Dorgères is very determined in his opposition. He has fixed ideas on this subject."

"Say rather prejudices, which would yield to the necessity of making

you a deserved reparation. I will answer for that. I am satisfied that if I said to him, this very evening, 'I have found the man who stole my casket, I have compelled him to return its contents, and this man is not your secretary——',"

"You would do that?" interrupted Robert.

"Why not? But allow me to finish. If I added: 'For personal reasons I don't deem it advisable to denounce this fellow, and I wish the matter to be dropped; but we have wronged an honest man, and we are in honour bound to indemnify him for the injury we have done. In such a case apologies won't suffice, and I, for my part, am determined to ensure him a position superior to the one he has lost.' If I used this language to Mademoiselle Alice's father, what do you think he would say in response?"

"I don't know; but I do know that I have no reason to expect an act of justice which would be in direct opposition to all your previous conduct towards me."

"I am, nevertheless, ready to say and do all this. I will even restore Monsieur Dorgères the fifty-thousand francs stolen from him, on condition that you tell me where to find the casket stolen from me, if not by you, by parties you can designate."

"Still the same infamous accusation!"

"Notice, sir, that I don't require you to return the casket. I suspect that it is no longer in your power. The persons anxious to obtain possession of it have undoubtedly put it in a safe place, and they have probably destroyed the papers it contained, but I wish to know who these persons are. Name them, and as soon as I am sure that your information is correct I will go to Monsieur Dorgères, and I promise you upon my honour that I will tell him all I have just said to you."

"If I were able to name them I must have been their accomplice."

"Accomplice is a strong word. Listen. Shall I tell you frankly my opinion of this affair? A woman was the cause of all the trouble."

"A woman!"

"Yes, as usual. You Frenchmen have a remarkably true proverb, 'Look for the woman.' I am looking for her, and you know very well I can find her. I see no reason to conceal the fact that the documents stolen from me are State papers. I do not object to telling you that I am entrusted with the mission of watching the intrigues which are carried on by the enemies of my government in foreign countries. These enemies belong to a society which employs every possible means to attain its end, which is the destruction of all social institutions. Its members shrink neither from theft nor murder, and I should not be in the least surprised if they attempted to assassinate me, so I surround myself with the numerous precautions you must have noticed since you became my guest; and for the same reason I deposited with my banker these important documents, which I knew they desired to destroy, but the precaution was useless. Among them are many women, some of the best born, richest, and most charming of their sex. You have probably been enamoured of one of these sirens. Oh! I don't suppose you are so still. I know that you are deeply in love with Mademoiselle Dorgères. But a former mistress always retains a certain amount of influence over the man who has loved her. She beguiled you with fine phrases about tyranny and liberty, and finally asked you to assist a holy cause, and save the unfortunates enumerated upon a list of suspected persons contained in my casket. To decide you,

she threatened to write to Mademoiselle Dorgères and tell her that she was her rival. You could not resist the influence.

"Oh, I don't blame you. Many others would have succumbed; besides, you did not consider it a positive crime to reveal the secret word and furnish the model of the key that would open the safe. The bank notes were probably stolen by this woman, who knew that you would leave the same evening. She hoped that you would never return, and would be accused of the robbery, so that suspicion might be averted from herself, and that politics might not be supposed to have any connection with the affair. It was she, no doubt who, learning that you were in Paris, sent you, anonymously, those fifty thousand francs. In compelling you to keep them, she compromised you still more. You see, sir, that you are not really guilty. You have been weak, that is all. If I thought you a thief I should not have treated you as I have. And you must also feel that the only honourable and profitable thing you can do is to confess all. Tell me this woman's name, and in three months you shall be the happy husband of Mademoiselle Dorgères."

"Sir," responded Robert de Carnoël, looking the colonel full in the eyes, "you have a vivid imagination, but this romance will not produce the desired effect. I don't know the woman—if it was a woman—who took your casket, and I have nothing more to say to you on the subject."

"Then Mademoiselle Alice Dorgères will marry Jules Vignory," murmured the colonel, as if talking to himself.

"Vignory!" repeated M. de Carnoël, turning very pale; "what do you mean?"

The colonel had reserved this shot for the end of the engagement, and he could see that it had struck home. "I mean that Monsieur Vignory is very much in love with Mademoiselle Alice, and that the match would be very pleasing to Monsieur Dorgères, who desires to make Vignory his partner as well as his son-in-law. This has been his wish for some time, and he was greatly irritated by the discovery that you had won his daughter's affections, and so he dismissed you abruptly."

"It is not that which surprises me. But Jules Vignory was my friend—I hope he is my friend still. I have told him of my love for Mademoiselle Dorgères. Had he also loved her he would not have concealed the fact from me. We were too intimate, and he is too honourable to attempt to supplant me. Do you mean to assert that Vignory has betrayed me?"

"No, certainly not. He has defended you with all his might. He espoused your cause very warmly, and tried his best to convince Monsieur Dorgères that you could have had nothing whatever to do with the robbery."

"I was sure of it!"

"And this was the more meritorious since suspicion would naturally fall upon him. But that is no reason why he should not have been captivated, as well as yourself, by his employer's daughter. Mademoiselle Alice is charming, and the young man has eyes. Why should he have told you a secret which he scarcely acknowledged to himself, for he loved without hope? Why, I ask, should he have confided this to you, whom he knew was loved?"

"And he opened his heart to you, a comparative stranger? Impossible!"

"I said nothing of the kind. But Monsieur Dorgères said this

morning to his cashier: 'You suit me. Will you marry my daughter?' Vignory suggested that Mademoiselle Alice probably did not agree with her father. Do you know what Monsieur Dorgères replied? Simply this: 'I am not certain but she may still love the unfortunate young man I so foolishly introduced into my household—I even believe that she does—but he has conducted himself in such a way that she will soon renounce the absurd idea of marrying him.' And as the young cashier did not seem convinced, Monsieur Dorgères asked him if his affection was bestowed elsewhere, or if he entertained a dislike for his daughter. Whereupon Vignory, driven to the wall, confessed that for two years he had secretly adored Mademoiselle Alice, but that he had concealed his love because he knew that Mademoiselle Alice had bestowed her heart upon you. After such an avowal Monsieur Dorgères had little difficulty in overcoming his clerk's scruples, and he announced that from this date he took him as a partner, and that he would allow him time to win his daughter's favour. 'I will aid you to the extent of my power,' he added, 'and Alice is too sensible not to yield.' Of course you do not suppose that Vignory said 'no.' That, my dear sir, is the true condition of things. What do you think of it?"

"It seems to me," replied Robert, in a voice husky with emotion, "that I have nothing to look forward to in the future, and that even if I had committed the crime of which I am accused, I should reap no advantage from accepting the shameful bargain you propose."

"Excuse me; you forget that if I convinced Monsieur Dorgères of your innocence, the situation would change instantly. The father would become your ally; the daughter has not ceased to love you, and your rival would not attempt to dispute your claim. Only, the blow must be struck at once. Don't wait until the sentiments upon which you can now count grow cold. In a word, take advantage of the opportunity that presents itself. In a few days it will be too late, and you will bitterly regret that you did not follow my advice."

"No; for you advise me to commit an infamous act."

"Is that what hinders you? Do you fear to deliver up the woman who has stolen these papers? Even if she were punished as she deserves, your scruples would be exaggerated, for she is the cause of your ruin; but you need have no fears. We are in France, and I can do nothing against her. I only wish to know her so that I may be able to guard against new schemes of violence. I play merely a defensive rôle, and I only ask you to aid me in defending myself."

"If you meant what you said, you would not attach so much importance to the name of an enemy you cannot fear."

"You are mistaken. These people are very formidable, and you can have no interest in protecting them, since you are not their compatriot. Now, whatever happens, I promise that they shall never know that you pointed them out to me."

"Enough, sir," said Robert. "I have consented to hear you to the end. But understand, once for all, that my determination has never wavered, as you seem to suppose. If I knew the secret you are endeavouring to extort from me, I would not reveal it, not even to clear myself of the foul accusation against me; but I don't know it, and even if you put me to torture you would draw nothing more from me."

"Is that your final decision?"

"Yes."

"Then, whatever may happen, you have only yourself to blame."

"What worse thing can happen? I am your prisoner. I shall not always be so, however; sooner or later you will be obliged to surrender me to my judges. They will question me, and to them I will reply. To you I have nothing whatever to say."

"So you imagine I shall set you at liberty some day or other?" said M. Borisoff, with a sardonic smile. "You forget that by imprisoning you in my house I have committed two or three violations of law that are severely punished in your country—arbitrary arrest and usurpation of authority, for instance—and I should certainly find myself in a very compromising position if I released you, for you would not fail to relate the story of your wrongs."

"Do you intend to assassinate me, then?" inquired Robert, looking the colonel straight in the eyes.

"Fie!" responded M. Borisoff, scornfully; "such expedients are not resorted to by gentlemen, and I pride myself on a nobility as ancient as your own. Besides, I am certain to conquer your obstinacy—I shall detain you here until you decide to speak."

"And if I persist in maintaining silence?"

"Then I shall send you to Siberia—I have the means of doing so—a post-chaise constructed expressly for this kind of work, trusty servants to guard you during the journey, and diplomatic passports, at sight of which no French or German authorities would venture to examine the vehicle in which you were imprisoned. You would arrive at your destination without having been seen by any one, and no one would ever hear of you any more. But, before adopting such extreme measures, I intend to give you time for reflection, so I grant you a month's respite."

"Neither in ten years nor in a month will you extort anything further from me!" cried Robert.

"A month will suffice," said the colonel; "when that interval has elapsed you will have no further interest in purchasing the influence I now offer to use in your behalf with Monsieur Dorgères, for his daughter will be irrevocably lost to you; I shall have used every possible means to induce you to open your eyes, and I still hope that time and reflection will inspire you with wiser ideas, and that you will decide before it is too late. You will see me every day, and I shall make it a point to keep you acquainted with what is going on in Monsieur Dorgères' household. He conceals nothing from me now, and I can follow, step by step, the progress that your friend and rival, Jules Vignory, makes in the good graces of Mademoiselle Alice. I will take care to bring you an accurate report. For the present, I shall conceal what I know, and until further orders I shall allow Monsieur Dorgères to think what he pleases of you. It is probable that, hearing nothing more concerning you, he will cease to apprehend any further danger to his daughter from your presence in Paris; and he may well do so, for Mademoiselle Dorgères must be greatly incensed at your failure to keep the appointment you yourself had made. That is one of the offences women never forgive. To be inclined to pardon the offence she would need to know that you were not free at three o'clock to-day, and I certainly shall not tell her that."

"Go on," said M. de Carnoël, bitterly. "Invent whatever odious tortures you like; my courage will not fail me."

"I have finished," replied the colonel, calmly. "There remains but a single important point to be alluded to. The woman who has robbed me,

and whom you hope to save by your obstinate silence, will not escape me, depend upon it. My emissaries are already on her track; they will discover her, I am certain; and the sacrifice of your liberty and honour, which you have so foolishly made, will not preserve her from the fate she deserves. Now I must leave you, for I fear to miss Monsieur Dorgères and his charming daughter by delaying any longer; and I am extremely anxious to see them this evening, so that I can bring you news of them to-morrow—of them and Monsieur Vignory, for I think he will accompany them to the ball.” With this cruelly ironical peroration M. Borisoff bowed to his prisoner, and departed as he had come.

Robert made no attempt to detain him. What could he say to his affable executioner, who had been torturing him for an hour or more? He did not hope either to soften or convince him, and, besides, he was nearly exhausted. The anger which had sustained him in this unequal struggle was giving way to profound discouragement. His pride was not subdued, but he felt a bitter consciousness of his powerlessness. Of all the wounds his pitiless tormentor had inflicted on him, the most grievous was that of learning that Jules Vignory was his rival. Vignory, his best and only friend, loved Alice and aspired to her hand; and the odious Borisoff had not lied in declaring that M. Dorgères favoured the pretensions of his cashier. Had not M. Dorgères distinctly declared that he wished a plain citizen, capable of being his successor, for a son-in-law? Vignory fulfilled all these conditions, for he was born for business, and had not the misfortune to belong to the nobility. He possessed, moreover, many qualities calculated to please a young girl. He was handsome, young, intelligent, and modest, and no unworthy action had ever been imputed to him. His honour was intact; and in assuming the defence of M. de Carnoël he had given evidence of rare generosity.

“I owe him a debt of gratitude,” murmured Robert, sadly; “and yet it is through him that I shall lose Alice, for she will marry him. Why should she refuse to obey her father? My absence will release her from the promise she made to me. She no longer believes that I have been unjustly accused—she despises me.” Then he buried his face in his hands and wept. A profound silence reigned around him; and there was nothing to indicate that the colonel’s servants would disturb his solitude during the night that was just beginning. He soon felt ashamed of his weakness. “I must get out of this place or die,” he muttered between his teeth. “If I can find no other way to escape, I will set fire to this accursed house.”

But his jailers were undoubtedly watching him, and as fire does not burn without noise and smoke, they would not fail to appear before it had opened a way of escape for the prisoner, so he speedily renounced this idea, and began to examine the gallery in which he was confined with more attention than he had previously bestowed upon it. The candles in the numerous candelabra diffused a brilliant light, but the lofty ceiling was veiled in shadow, and on looking up he could see that the moonlight was streaming through the windows above an immense book-case. There were three of these windows, arranged like those of an artist’s studio, and each of them contained three large panes which could only be opened by the aid of some ingenious mechanism. M. de Carnoël had no hope of accomplishing this, and he could scarcely dare to break them just then; but he thought that if he could reach them he might at least discover if they offered any practicable means of escape. To prepare for

such an attempt, it was necessary to gain a correct idea of the house he wished to escape from, and on his arrival he had felt no inclination to study the arrangements and surroundings, since, not suspecting that he would be forcibly detained, he had allowed himself to be conducted through the various apartments without bestowing any notice on them. The most he could recollect was that the reception-room looked out upon a garden. What he now desired to know was whether this garden extended along under the gallery.

He took a candle and began his inspection. At one end of this immense library he discovered a winding staircase, and on mounting this he reached an upper gallery, protected by a balustrade and adorned with antique statuary. The windows were exactly on a level with the floor of the gallery, and Robert put down his light to look outside. He recognised the garden he had previously seen, full of large trees and surrounded by a high wall. A sheet of spotless snow enshrouded everything—not a footprint was visible—so he concluded that the colonel's servants were not on that side of the house, though they might be on guard directly under the windows. He estimated the distance to the ground as at least thirty feet, that is to say, more than enough to break the neck of any one who attempted to leap out. Besides, there was another obstacle—the wall, which separated this garden from another garden, or perhaps from a court-yard, for no trees were visible beyond this wall. However, on looking attentively, Carnoël distinctly discerned, upon the top of it, an object which seemed to move, and it was not long before he distinguished the head and shoulders of a human being.

What was this person doing there? Why had he climbed this wall, and how had he succeeded in doing so? Robert thought at first that it must be some spy placed on guard there by the colonel, but then a sentinel would not be stationed at such an inconvenient and prominent point when he might be concealed in a dark corner. Besides, there was no ladder leaning against the wall on the garden side, and the man must have mounted from behind. The wall, then, must separate the garden from the boulevard, and this person must have scaled it from the street. With what object? For theft, probably; but the prowler must be very bold, for the night was not far advanced. Possibly he had been sent by his accomplices to study the arrangements of the dwelling, for he made no attempt to descend from his elevated position.

"I have no reason to expect any help from outside," reflected Robert; "still I risk nothing by making a signal to him. No doubt he will reply to it by instantly disappearing. Nevertheless, I am going to try."

Having arrived at this conclusion, M. de Carnoël took the candle, raised it high above his head, and approached close to the window-panes. It was so dark outside that he felt sure his signal would be observed, and he waited, expecting to see the person on the wall disappear from view. He remained, however, and even raised himself a little on his elbows, as if to examine the light which had just appeared, in a more comfortable position. Encouraged by the first result of his manoeuvre, Robert determined to make a more decided demonstration. He lowered his light, and holding it at arm's length he moved it slowly to and fro in a way calculated to convince the watcher that the signal was meant for him. His design was understood, for the individual seated himself astride on the wall with his face towards the lighted window.

M. de Carnoël could now see his whole form, and he looked unusually

small, almost like a child. The distance was so great that Robert could not distinguish his features, but he could see that he wore a flat cap. The lad raised his arms and pointed to his breast, a pantomime which seemed to ask : "Is it to me you are making signals?"

M. de Carnoël replied by waving his light to and fro, and bringing it to a level with his face. The boy looked at him attentively for several seconds, and then rose to his feet, lifted his cap, and bowed. "It would certainly seem as if he had recognised me," said Robert, "and yet where can he have seen me? But what is he going to do now? Ah! he is going; he puts his left leg over the wall, at the same time he waves me an expressive adieu, as much as to say: 'Do not be alarmed; I will return.'" At this moment, owing to some change in the boy's position, two or three rows of buttons on the front of his jacket began to glitter in the moonlight. "Georget!" Robert exclaimed, a light suddenly breaking upon his troubled mind, "it is Georget!"

He remembered now that on his arrival that morning he had noticed the lad playing on the sidewalk of the Rue de Vigny with some other children, and that Georget had seemed so greatly surprised at seeing his employer's ex-secretary seated in a fine carriage that he had not recollected to bow to him. M. de Carnoël had always treated the lad kindly, and Georget had never neglected an opportunity to show his liking for the young secretary. He pleaded for the honour of doing his errands, and his eyes sparkled with joy whenever Robert gave him an encouraging word. So it was not strange if he felt interested in the fate of the protector he loved. But how had he gained a knowledge of what had transpired since Robert entered the colonel's house? How had he discovered that M. de Carnoël had been detained by force? for he certainly must have discovered all this since he had decided to scale the wall of Colonel Borisoff's garden, at the risk of breaking his neck, without speaking of the danger of being caught by the inmates of the house or by the police. No doubt he had come in the hope of discovering where M. de Carnoël was detained, and of entering into communication with him. Who had despatched him on such a delicate mission? It was not likely that he had conceived the project of rescuing M. de Carnoël unaided. On leaving, he had made a gesture that seemed to signify: "Rely upon me—or upon others."

What others? Who else took an interest in the absent one? Could it be Alice? But this flash of hope was quickly extinguished. "No," murmured Robert, "no, I am mad. It certainly was not Alice who sent him. If she still loved me she would not have consented to accompany her father to this ball."

Then he pictured Alice in the midst of the *fête*, listening to the perfidious compliments of Borisoff and smiling on Jules Vignory. But these cruel fancies gradually became less distinct. Excessive suffering finally calms irritated nerves, and after so many successive shocks his physical nature asserted its rights. He undressed and threw himself on the bed that had been prepared for him, and soon fell into a profound slumber. When he next opened his eyes the sun was shining through the windows of the gallery. While he was completing his toilet the door at the further end of the room opened, and M. Briare entered, suave and smiling.

"What do you desire?" inquired Robert, in a decidedly discouraging tone.

"First, to know if you have rested well," replied the major-domo.

But as the prisoner greeted this polite question with a disdainful silence, M. Briare added : " My visit has still another object ; to save you the trouble of searching for your pocket-book."

Robert suddenly recollected that he had left a pocket-book containing all his papers and his entire fortune in his overcoat the day before. He turned to pick up the garment, but the major-domo, still calm and gracious, remarked : " You will not find it. It is no longer there."

" Then you stole it from me while I was asleep," exclaimed M. de Carnoël.

" I have taken it on deposit, quite a different thing, for it is for you to say when I shall return it. I shall do so on the day you decide to tell my master what he asks. You know perfectly well that Colonel Borisoff has no desire nor intention to appropriate its contents, but fearing you might make a bad use of it, he deputed me to take charge of it conditionally, as well as of certain letters which it is important for him to preserve—among them one from an anonymous friend announcing that he returns fifty thousand francs formerly lent to him by your father."

Robert turned pale. He did not regret the loss of the money, but the letter was his justification, for it established the fact that the sum came to him from one of his father's debtors, or at least that he might have believed such to be the case. And now it was in the colonel's power to suppress the only proof of innocence that he could furnish. " So Monsieur Borisoff ordered you to bring him this pocket-book, and you took advantage of my sleep to rob me?" he said, angrily. " I might have expected it. I shall not degrade myself by complaining to you, a mere servant, but I shall lose no time in telling your master what I think of this new outrage."

" You will not see him to-day," replied the major-domo, unmoved. " He is a little indisposed, but he ordered me to hold myself at your disposal, and if you have need of me you have only to ring. The entire household is at your orders until it pleases you to leave. Tell my master what he desires to know, and the doors shall instantly be thrown open."

Robert dismissed him with a gesture. " Yes, I shall leave the house," he thought, " but not on the shameful conditions that Borisoff wants to impose upon me."

IX.

THAT evening, despite the snow, the theatres were open as usual ; but there was only a limited number of play-goers, owing to the severe cold. However, although Maxime Dorgères did not usually belong to the class that brave cold and heat with equal indifference, he might have been seen entering the Variétés at about nine o'clock. After his expedition to the Bois he had returned home, half dead with cold. It took him long to warm himself, and it was fully five o'clock before he thought of dressing to go out again. The striking of the clock reminded him that he had meant to call on Vignory to tell him some of the incidents of the day, though he did not intend to speak of Alice's visit to the Bois. Unfortunately, on reaching the Rue de Suresnes, he found the bank closed, and the cashier gone to dinner. This information was furnished by the porter, who added that his master was going to a ball that evening with Mademoiselle Alice. This was good news. Alice going to a ball meant

that Alice had consoled herself, or at least partially so. Maxime continued his search for Vignory, and on calling at the house where the cashier lived the porter informed him that he was not at home, although he had returned to dress, as he was to dine out and afterwards attend a ball. This information increased Maxime's satisfaction. If Vignory was to dine out, it was certainly at the banker's; and if he was going to a ball, it was with Alice.

"Ah, my little cousin recovered sooner than I thought possible," said Maxime, joyously, "and I have the satisfaction of having helped to cure her. I have performed a commendable action, and earned the right to amuse myself this evening. But where and how? I think I'll go to the Café Anglais and seek inspiration in an old bottle of Château-Latour."

He did so, and the Bordeaux had the effect of making everything appear more deeply tinged with *couleur de rose*. Instead of one bottle, he drank two, and when he went out even the snow-covered street seemed charming. Still it did not take him long to discover that the side-walk was scarcely tenable, and being at the door of the Variétés, he went in rather for the sake of finding a shelter than of seeing the play. The audience was small, and he had no difficulty in finding a place in the second row of stalls. The first entr'acte had just begun when he entered, and the spectators did not seem inclined to take advantage of it to stretch their legs. The cold kept them to their seats, so Maxime was able to examine them at his leisure, but he failed to recognise any friends. With no one to speak to, and not a single pretty face to stare at, he was already beginning to wonder if he would have courage enough to remain until the end, when his eyes fell upon the occupants of a box to the right of the stage. They were three in number, and were all laughing and talking noisily.

"That quacking can only have been made by that goose, Delphine," thought Maxime. And looking more attentively, he perceived the feminine acquaintance whom he had met a few evenings before at the rink; she had come with her friends, Cora and Berthe Verrier, and the latter, on perceiving Maxime, immediately began a very expressive pantomime. Maxime, however, contented himself with waving his hand to the party, and then turned his back without further ceremony.

His seat was on the left side of the orchestra, and it was difficult to tell if the two low boxes beside him were empty, or occupied by couples who did not care to show themselves, for the screens were partially raised. This semblance of mystery excited his curiosity a little, and he leaned forward to get a better view; but he only caught sight of a lady's shoulders (superb shoulders, by the way), and part of a pretty profile. He waited patiently for the lady to show herself more fully. However, she was evidently not alone, for she drew back every now and then to speak to some one in the rear of the box, probably a gentleman. This discovery had the effect of calming Maxime, who did not care to disturb a *tête-à-tête* by inquisitive glances. So he resumed his former position, and in doing so his eyes involuntarily turned to the box in which Delphine and her friends were seated. The coldness with which he had greeted their former advances did not seem to have calmed their ardour. They were chattering and gesticulating with their glasses turned upon the box opposite. Maxime was congratulating himself that he had not gone to see them, when little Berthe again began to make signs to him. She was trying to attract his attention with one hand, while with the other she pointed to the box on

the left. This pantomime evidently meant: "Come here, I have something to show you that will interest you—something I can see from here but which escapes you from where you sit."

"What can she mean?" he thought. "Can it be that I know the couple in this box beside me? Berthe is an intolerable chatterer, but she doesn't lack shrewdness. I think I'll go and see. I am dying of *ennui* here." Thereupon he left his seat and wended his way to the box on the right.

"Here you are at last!" cried Berthe Verrier.

"Do you know you are very disagreeable?" chimed in Delphine, with an attempt at dignity. "To turn your back on three ladies who are calling you is the height of ill-breeding."

"Or the height of discretion," replied Maxime, laughingly. "I feared to crowd you."

"Bah!" exclaimed Cora. "You know very well that there are four seats here. The fourth doesn't command a view of the actors, it's true; but it isn't the actors nor even the actresses that we wish to show you."

"What is it, then?"

"You don't deserve to see anything," resumed Berthe. "I take the trouble to summon you with gracious gestures, and you don't move. I have a great mind to let you beg awhile, to teach you to be less proud."

"Oh, I know. It is about the lady over there. I have seen those shoulders somewhere before."

"Indeed! Take a good look at her. Would you like my opera-glass?"

"What is the use? Just now there is a total eclipse. The star has disappeared."

"Oh, she will appear again in a moment. In the meantime examine the satellite."

Maxime perceived a man leaning forward in the box, a man who awakened some vague remembrance in his mind. He was a big fellow, with broad shoulders and a rather repulsive countenance; but he was dressed with scrupulous care, and his manner was as stiff and dignified as that of a lord whose pride is supported by a respectable number of millions.

"Is it for the purpose of admiring this foreign prince that you have so graciously granted me a seat by your side?" inquired Maxime, adding: "Perhaps you know him?"

"Not at all. It is the first time I ever saw him."

"Then it is the lady you know?"

"Possibly."

"Who is she?"

"Guess."

"How do you expect me to guess? I have scarcely seen the tip of her nose."

"And you don't remember her husband?"

"Not in the least."

"Good. I suspected as much, for I have always thought that she wasn't married, although you told me the contrary."

"I told you so? You are certainly making sport of me."

"On the contrary, you are making game of me. It is evident that this bearded giant isn't her husband, but you certainly ought to know, for you visit her, I suppose."

"My dear Berthe, I warn you that if you continue to talk in enigmas I shall go away."

"I ought to let you go, but I am a kind-hearted girl, and I don't wish to make you languish any longer," replied Berthe, gaily. "Have you still your bracelet?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Then you are, no doubt, still in love with the princess who gave it to you? Don't you remember that I promised to tell you her name?"

"Yes, and you even pretended that the said princess was a spurious article."

"Exactly; and you would have learned more if that Hungarian physician who attends Delphine hadn't interrupted us."

"But this evening, at least, there is nothing to prevent you from completing the information."

"I warn you that I shall dispel some illusions."

"That does not matter; go on."

"Ah, well! I once had the honour of taking supper with the lady of your dreams at Peters's."

"You?"

"Your astonishment isn't very complimentary; still, I forgive you. You still believe that you have made a conquest in the highest circles—to which I don't belong. Neither does your adored one, I assure you. A month ago she was the particular friend of a foreigner, who was the acquaintance of another foreigner, who chanced to be a particular friend of mine. The sentence is a trifle complicated, but it perfectly explains the situation. Now, it happened that these two foreigners visited this same theatre one evening. They came separately, each with his one particular friend, but they met in the *foyer* during the evening, and decided to have a little supper at Peters's after the performance."

"Well, tell me all—what she said—how she looks—her name!"

"Oh! she didn't choose to tell me her name, but she might be called Carmen, or Dolores, for she has a Spanish air, though she speaks French to perfection. She is lively, and by no means haughty, but she is not inclined to make a casual acquaintance her confidant. I could not find out where she came from, nor what kind of life she leads. I fancy that her principal acquaintances are Russians, Turks, and other birds of passage, like those who took supper with us that evening. My friend left two days afterwards for Moldavia, and I have not heard of him since; while, as for her, I had forgotten all about her, until I saw your bracelet. When you showed it to me at the rink, I did not at first remember where I had seen it; but afterwards I recollected the supper at Peters's. It was there that she showed it to me. A turquoise was missing, which she wished to have replaced, and she asked me the address of some good jeweller. I mentioned yours, in the Rue de la Paix, you know."

"And have you never seen her since?"

"Not until this evening. She is sitting there in the box opposite."

"Impossible!"

"I swear it. I have excellent eyes, and I have seen her as plainly as I now see you, and as you yourself could see her if she were not concealed by that screen. But, unfortunately, she also saw me, and as she probably does not care to cultivate my acquaintance, she immediately hid herself. I would bet anything she is afraid I might visit her box and inquire about the predecessor of that giant with the red moustaches."

"Well," said Maxime, "to tell if you speak the truth I must catch a

glimpse of the lady. As she does not seem inclined to show herself, I am going to leave you, so as to watch the box where she is hiding. I shall wait in the passage, if need be, to see her."

The curtain was about to rise, and as several stalls were vacant, Maxime selected one in the first row, not too far from the way out. Nothing was changed in the box occupied by the unknown woman. The screen which concealed her was still raised, and the cavalier with the broad shoulders still sat with his back to the audience. While waiting for the woman to show herself, Maxime reflected. He could not doubt the truth of the information he had received, corroborated as it was by the conversation he had held with the jeweller; besides, Berthe could have no reason for inventing the story of the supper at Peters's. Nor did the fact that the woman in question led an irregular life surprise him, for he had never imagined that the audacious creature who had twice assailed the banker's safe was a model of virtue; still, he was astonished that she should be able to attend the theatre scarcely a fortnight after an amputation which would have kept almost any woman in bed for months. "This foreigner with her," he thought, "must be very stupid not to see that his companion has lost a hand. But perhaps he was with her when she lost it. Yes, he is the accomplice; and he has brought her to the theatre only to divert suspicion. I have them now, though, and I won't lose sight of them again, even if I have to climb up behind their carriage. I shall soon dispose of them; I have had enough of playing the detective. But what shall I do with them, now that I have discovered them? I certainly ought to hand them over to the authorities; but such a course would hardly please my uncle and Colonel Borisoff. Still, I must finish the matter; and come what may, I intend to make the acquaintance of the owner of the bracelet this very evening."

While ruminating thus, Maxime lost sight of the box for an instant, and when he turned to it again the screen was lowered, the man had disappeared, and nothing was to be seen of the lady.

"They are gone, or going. Oh, they shan't escape like that; I will overtake them," said Maxime, rushing out like a madman, to the great annoyance of the spectators around him. He reached the corridor just in time to see the gentleman donning an overcoat. He was alone, however, so the lady had not left the box; and he evidently did not intend to return before the end of the performance, for he handed a coin to the man who had brought him his overcoat. He paid no attention to Maxime, who scrutinised him closely, being still more impressed with the idea that this was not the first time he had seen that long yellow face, those bushy red moustaches, cavernous eyes, and bristling eyebrows.

"Where the devil have I seen him?" he wondered. "But no matter, the lady has remained, and now that she is no longer watched she will certainly show herself. Why should she continue to hide? She doesn't know that I have her bracelet. But I know that it belongs to her, and I can study her at my leisure. And now I think of it, that man is the very image of the Cerberus who shut the door in my face this morning in the Rue Joffroy. How strange if they were really one and the same, and stranger still if the lady were—but we shall soon see."

The first thing he did see was Berthe Verrier pointing to the box with a gesture implying—"Why don't you go? What are you waiting for, now the coast is clear?"

He turned quickly, and could not repress an exclamation that elicited

an angry "Hush!" from the indignant spectators. In the front of the box, in the full light, there now sat the beauty of the skating rink. He could scarcely believe his eyes, and yet it was really she. And she was the person Berthe persisted in declaring to be the owner of the bracelet. "Impossible!" muttered the stupefied Maxime. "Berthe's mad. The thief has but one hand, and this lady certainly has two, unless one of them is artificial—surgery has made such progress. But no, I am dreaming—she uses the left hand with perfect ease. Besides I will examine them both more closely, for I intend to pay her a visit, and the sooner the better. She may leave at any moment, and whether the bracelet belongs to her or not, I must speak to her, and she must answer me."

The belle of the Rue Jouffroy did not seem aware that the gentleman she had met at the skating rink was there watching her, though she paid no attention to the stage, but gazed abstractedly at the audience. Just as she turned her ivory lorgnette on the opposite box, Berthe Verrier rose to mark the bow she made her. But this bow was not returned.

"She does not wish to recognise Berthe," thought Maxime; "she does not regard her as a desirable acquaintance, and when she discovers me, my face will also recall recollections she won't care to revive."

However, the brunette continued to inspect the audience, and it was not long before her eyes met those of Maxime. It was a critical moment, but the result was not what he had expected by any means, for she bowed slightly and bestowed a gracious smile upon him.

In an instant he was on his feet, making his way to the door; but this new departure was not effected without difficulty, for the people around him were most indignant with Maxime's continual comings and goings. There was a general protest, in which the pit joined, though not at all interested in the matter, as Maxime only trod on the feet of the gentlemen seated in the front row of the stalls. The actors paused; from all sides rose cries of "Turn him out," and the police were even on the point of interfering; but M. Dorgères' unruly nephew received this shower of vituperation unmoved, and continued on his way, merely remarking in a low tone to those he was compelled to stumble over: "If my apologies are not sufficient, I can give you my card."

The angry spectators thereupon yielded, and allowed him to pass without further difficulty. He went straight to the box occupied by the beautiful skater, and on entering it he found her in partial darkness, for she had again raised the screen to shield herself from the glare of the foot-lights and the gaze of the audience. "I meet you again at last," she remarked, offering a hand to Maxime, who felt certain as he pressed it that it was not made of wood.

"So you have been looking for me, then?" he said, gaily.

"Yes. And now since Fate has brought us together again, let us talk. It seems to me that we have a great deal to say to each other."

"Much to reproach each other with, rather. You were deceiving me when you declared that you were going to leave Paris for a fortnight."

"And you were rash enough to visit the house in the Rue Jouffroy this morning, in spite of my prohibition."

"How did you know that?"

"How did I know it? Why, I have been subjected to a frightful scene on your account. It almost made me ill."

"Indeed! I thought I saw you to-day, about three o'clock, on the lake in the Bois."

"That is my method of curing myself. But if you saw me, why did you not speak to me?"

"Because I was not alone."

"That means, I suppose, that you were with a lady?"

"You were with a gentleman a few moments ago."

"Alas, yes!"

"Why do you say alas? Does this gentleman bore you?"

"He bores me to death."

"Why do you submit to it, then?"

"Because I am compelled to do so."

"Is he your husband?"

"No, indeed! I wouldn't marry him if he gave me all his millions."

"But if he isn't your husband, by what right does he inflict himself upon you?"

The stranger seemed to suppress a strong inclination to laugh, and hiding her face behind her fan, asked: "So you took me for a real lady the evening you escorted me home?"

"Your manner and language certainly indicated it. I had no difficulty in believing so."

"This is very flattering to me; but confess that you know to the contrary now."

"I confess that a young lady over there boasted just now that she had taken supper with you at a restaurant, when you were accompanied by a foreigner, as on this occasion, but not by the same one—at least so Berthe Verrier declares."

"Berthe Verrier is quite right. The gentleman she alluded to left Paris the next day."

"I call that frankness, upon my word!" Maxime exclaimed, gaily.

"And now may I ask why you pretended not to recognise Berthe?"

"Ah, well, my dear Monsieur Dorgères, you must understand that I have decided to separate myself from my former associates. I don't care to frequent the company of disreputable persons who first opened their eyes in a porter's lodge."

"So you are not of the same class as these adventure-seekers?"

"No. I don't even resemble them, for the reason that it is the adventures which seem to seek me. For instance, I went to the rink simply to skate, having a few hours' liberty before me and wishing to devote them to an amusement I am very fond of, but there I found an idler who took it into his head to make a conquest of me."

"The attempt was not successful," said Maxime, laughingly. "You left him without ceremony, and if the happy thought of coming here had not entered his mind, he would never have seen you again."

"He would have seen me in a fortnight if he had taken the trouble to call, or even to write to me."

"Why in a fortnight?"

"Because my lord and master expected to go away before that time."

"Had you told me so, I should not have presented myself too soon. To crown the misfortune, it was he who received me. I recognised him at once. This morning I took him for your porter."

"That's quite natural, and extremely amusing. He is frightfully ugly."

"And jealous, too, it seems to me. And yet he must have seen me this evening in the stalls, and still he went out."

"He did not see you, he only looks at me, and if he has gone it is only

because he was impelled to do so by a stronger passion than jealousy—a passion for play. You can't imagine how I bless cards, for I am indebted to them for an occasional hour of freedom. To-night, at ten o'clock, he is to be at a card-party, and I am rid of him for the evening."

"Until to-morrow."

"Probably; but I am not certain. Sometimes he wins heavily, and leaves. He is very avaricious."

"I see that it would not take much to make you detest him. He is a Russian, is he not?"

"I don't know. I have troubled myself very little about his nationality. He must have been born in the wilds of the Carpathian mountains, for he has the manners of a bear."

"The people in the Rue Jouffroy say that he receives no visitors, and that he lives on a stock of provisions he has stowed away in a cellar."

"So you have been questioning the neighbours! But will you do me the favour to tell me why you have interested yourself so much in the life I lead."

"You can imagine, probably."

"You are going to say that you are in love with me. What is the use of telling such an untruth? I am perfectly well aware that you don't love me; you scarcely know me, in fact. Besides, I have good reason to believe that you love another."

This was an excellent opportunity for speaking of the bracelet, to which the lady evidently alluded; but Maxime did not think the moment had yet come to strike the decisive blow. He watched the movements of the fair stranger with all his eyes, and he could see that she used her hands with a freedom and ease which made it impossible to suppose for a moment that either of them were false.

"My protestations," he said, "would be of no avail, since you don't seem inclined to believe me; but before long I shall succeed in convincing you that my heart is free."

"Do you intend to pay another visit to the Rue Jouffroy? If you do I shall be devoured by my ogre. He has the instincts of a Blue Beard."

"Have no fears of that. I shall heed your instructions in future and shall wait until he is safely out of the way. But since he is engaged in gambling this evening, what prevents you from taking supper with me?"

"Ah! my dear sir, it is much too early for supper, and, like Cinderella, I must be at home by midnight."

"You shall return at midnight; you shan't lose your slipper, and a person is always ready to eat oysters."

"You won't invite Berthe Verrier?"

"Heaven forbid! When I see her again I will tell her that you shut the door of your box in my face."

"That promise decides me. We will go whenever you like."

Maxime had expected a little more opposition, but his opinion of the lady had changed considerably during the last hour, and her acceptance did not cause him much astonishment. "You don't insist upon seeing the end of the play?" he asked.

"By no means. I didn't come here to amuse myself, but simply because my tyrant brought me," the brunette answered, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Then excuse me for a moment until I can engage a cab."

"That is not at all necessary; I like to walk in the snow and print my

feet in it. I always fancy that my friends will recognise them, and know the path I have taken."

"Upon my word, if your foot is as small as your hand I should not find it difficult to track you. But the streets are really impracticable this evening, and if you are not absolutely determined to walk, pray allow me to secure some means of transport."

"It is quite unnecessary; we can get supper near by, at Brebant's. It is only a few steps from here, and the Carpathian bear will never think of looking for me there. There are some charming rooms on the second floor."

"She seems to know all the restaurants," thought Maxime; but he replied: "Let us go to Brebant's, then. We shall only have to cross the street, and as you like the snow your taste will be gratified."

They hurried out, reached the deserted boulevard, and entered the restaurant, where they were offered the choice of several private rooms. Madame Sergent selected one with a single window opening on the boulevard a few feet above the sidewalk, and she was easily induced to order some oysters, a cold partridge, a lobster salad, and champagne. This was evidently not her first supper. Maxime watched her closely, and when she removed her gloves he took her two hands and kissed them one after another. She submitted with a good grace, and his last doubts fled. Nature alone could produce such hands, and we must add that even she does not produce them often. Convinced now that Madame Sergent was not the person whose hand had been left in the clutches of M. Dorgères' safe, Maxime felt that his task was less difficult. It would certainly be far easier to compel his companion to admit that she knew a thief, or had even been that thief's accomplice, than to admit that she herself was personally guilty.

The oysters were brought in, and Madame Sergent partook of them with a zest which pleased Maxime. She also allowed him to take a seat beside her on a divan, and to pour out the champagne, which she drank without much solicitation. All this was very delightful, and under other circumstances Maxime would only have thought of spending a pleasant hour with his charming companion; but he did not forget that he had come to extort a confession from Madame Sergent. Still, he feared that an abrupt attack would alarm her, that she would probably be less guarded after a few glasses of champagne, and might even allude to the bracelet herself.

"Life is certainly not without its charms," he exclaimed. "It is true that I spent the entire day tiring and freezing myself for people who are nowise grateful for my efforts; but, this evening, chance has brought me a meeting with the prettiest woman in Paris, and a supper with her in this cozy little room——"

"Not a word more, or I shall open the window," laughed the brunette. "In the first place, I'm not the prettiest woman in Paris, and I did not come here for you to make love to me, but to eat lobster salad."

"Only for that?"

"Yes; I have not tasted any for a month. My tyrant detests it, and he never consults me in ordering dinner."

"Fortunately his reign is drawing to a close."

"No, indeed; he wishes me to accompany him to some barbarous country."

"And you will consent to do so?"

"I don't know yet ; I have made no definite plans. But I shall go if I am troubled with *ennui*."

"Then tell me at once what must be done to amuse you, since that is the only means of detaining you."

"Amuse me ? Ah ! you only think of amusing yourself. You would do so far better with Berthe Verrier. She is not exacting."

"You do me injustice. I am much more sentimental than I appear."

"Ah, yes," laughed the lady ; "I had quite forgotten the bracelet you wore on your arm the other evening when you had the kindness to escort me home. By the way, you told me that it was a family relic, but of course I did not believe a word of your explanation."

"You were right. The ornament did not belong to my ancestors, nor was it given me by a lady."

"Are you going to pretend that you found it ?"

"Precisely : I did find it."

"And you kept it, instead of making an effort to restore it to its owner ? You will never convince me of that."

"Ah ! there's a strange story connected with it."

"Indeed. Do relate it, then. We have reached the partridge, and this is the right moment."

"You must know, then, that this bracelet belonged to a person—— By the way, have you ever seen it ?"

"No, I felt it ; but you did not show it to me."

"Here it is," said Maxime, depositing it on the cloth, and watching his companion all the while.

"It isn't at all pretty," she said. "Berthe Verrier would not wear it."

"Berthe Verrier has seen it, and agrees with you perfectly. She thinks it very ugly."

"But wait a moment," exclaimed Madame Sergent. "It seems to me that I, too, have seen it. Indeed, scarcely a month ago it certainly belonged to me. It isn't strange that she should recognise it. I wore it the evening I took supper in her company."

"What ! it belonged to you ?" Maxime exclaimed, with pretended astonishment.

"Yes," his companion quietly replied. "It was the first present I received from my Moldavian, and to please him I consented to wear it two or three times. I even recollect that, having lost one of the ugly stones with which it was ornamented, I went to a jeweller in the Rue de la Paix to have it replaced, but after the departure of my gallant swain I made all possible haste to get rid of it."

All this was said so naturally that Maxime could not entertain the slightest doubt respecting the explanation. "May I inquire whom you gave it to ?" he asked.

"Why, so as to get rid of it, I asked an auctioneer to include it in a sale that was to take place the following day. He consented ; the bracelet found a purchaser, and after all expenses were paid I received thirty-three louis for it. That's my story ; now let me hear yours."

"Mine ?" stammered Maxime.

"Certainly. Tell me how you happened to find it, and why you set such store upon it."

"Do you insist upon knowing ?" inquired the young man, after reflecting a moment.

"Most certainly I do !"

"Ah, well, this bracelet was lost by a woman who had committed a theft!"

"Only a theft? How commonplace; why not a murder, or some deed of vengeance—but an ordinary theft!"

"On the contrary, it was an extraordinary one."

"It must have been, to have interested you so much. You have undertaken to ferret out the thief, perhaps. A singular idea, truly."

"Each one to his taste. You like to walk in the snow; I like to guess riddles."

"Now I think of it," exclaimed Madame Sergent, with a burst of laughter, "you must have thought me the thief."

"I assure you that——"

"Don't deny it. I understand it all. Berthe Verrier saw the bracelet and told you it was mine—she saw me in my box—and provided with this valuable information, you began your campaign; and just now, when you placed the ornament on the table, you hoped to see me swoon. Really it's too absurd. If I were in your place, I would send for a policeman." Maxime tried to protest, but Madame Sergent, almost convulsed with merriment, continued. "What, you won't? You do me the honour to believe that I'm not a thief. Well, then, ring for the lobster, and open the window a moment. I have laughed so much that I am almost suffocated."

Maxime had lost countenance, and to gain time so as to recover his composure, he hastened to obey. He rang, opened the window, in spite of the intense cold that reigned outside, and returned, quite penitent, to his seat beside the charming creature whom he had wronged by his suspicions. He found her engaged in examining the bracelet. She was turning it round and round curiously. "It is indeed the same," she murmured. "See, here is the stone that was re-set. It is much more brilliant than the others and may be easily recognised. And only to think that this ugly bauble almost brought me before the assize court" she added, laughing still more heartily. "How absurd it is!"

Maxime was striving to find a word when he heard the key turn in the lock, and a rough voice calling: "I tell you that I will go in, you fool."

"Ah, good heavens, it's he! I'm lost!" shrieked Madame Sergent.

Naturally enough, Maxime only thought of defending her. He darted to the door, which opened just as he reached it, and he found himself face to face with the Carpathian bear, whose furious countenance left no doubt as to the object of his visit. He evidently knew that Madame Sergent was there, and he had come in pursuit of her. But he did not terrify Maxime, who placed himself before the door, saying in a firm tone:

"What do you want?"

The bear retreated a few steps, and then growled this brutal response: "I want the woman who is in this room; she belongs to me."

"There is no *woman* here. Go to the devil, and if that doesn't suit you, here is my card."

The furious man took the card that Maxime offered him. "Very well," said he, "to-morrow you will receive a call from my seconds, if I don't from yours. You know where I live, since you were spying round the house this morning. But your card isn't enough, I must have the woman."

"You shan't come in, and if you insist upon it, I——"

But Maxime did not have time to finish the sentence. A cloak brushed

against his shoulder, and Madame Sergent darted past him and speedily gained the staircase. The bear rushed after her, and the stupefied Maxime was left face to face with the frightened waiter who was bringing in the lobster. The idea of pursuing the man into the street, to engage in a struggle there, was not to be thought of, and he felt certain that the woman would find means of sending him news of her. He hastened to the window and saw them get into a cab which started off in the direction of the Faubourg Montmartre. Suddenly a new thought struck him. "The bracelet!" he exclaimed, "she has carried it away!"

It was only too true. The bracelet was no longer on the table, and it was more than probable that in her terror Madame Sergent had taken it away with her. Still, she had had sense enough to don her furs and escape through the open door. How were these circumstances to be reconciled? At all events, Maxime's campaign had been miserably conducted. His scheming had only resulted in a threatened duel with an exceedingly obnoxious person, and the loss of the object with which he had expected to unravel so many things. The duel did not alarm him, for he felt certain of his ability to give this boor a well-deserved lesson; and he even hoped that the sword-thrust he intended to bestow upon him would considerably enhance his merit in the eyes of the brunette. "She will be flattered by the fancy that I have risked my life for her," he thought, "and to reward me for this chivalrous act she will bring me back the bracelet."

These reflections were interrupted by the return of the waiter. "I have finished supper, give me the bill," said Maxime, putting on his overcoat.

The man had felt so certain of receiving this order that he had brought the bill with him, and Maxime hastily settled it and left the restaurant.

Hailing a cab, he drove to his club in view of finding a couple of seconds for the morrow, and on the way he was able to reflect over the events of the evening. "Is it possible that Delphine or her companions could have told that boor that we were at Brebant's?" he pondered. "No, they are not spiteful, and besides they did not know we were going there. Ah! I have it. The scoundrel recognised me, and suspected that I had come to the theatre in the hope of seeing the lady for whom I inquired this morning in the Rue Joffroy. So he told her that he was going to spend the night at play, and then stationed himself near the theatre to watch for us. He saw us enter the restaurant, prowled about the door, and when I opened the window he discovered where we were and rushed up like a wild beast. What a brute! He must be very rich for this woman to endure him. Bah, she is no better than the rest. It is a pity, for she is very pretty indeed. I was mad to believe that she was connected in any way with the robbery. She wouldn't have left a thousand-franc note in my uncle's safe. And this story about the sale of the bracelet by auction must be true. How shall I ever discover its owner now? I didn't even think of asking her the name of the auctioneer, which was very stupid on my part. Through him I might perhaps have discovered to whom the ornament was sold; and still that's very doubtful. When a person purchases anything by auction he isn't obliged to give his name; all that is needed is to give the money. Upon my word, I begin to think that I shall never discover anything."

Just as Maxime arrived at this conclusion, the vehicle drew up at the door of the club-house. To the young fellow's great disappointment, he only found a dozen members there, and among them not a single one whose services he could ask for his duel on the morrow. He was sorely perplexed

when, fortunately, the Hungarian physician entered to relieve him of his embarrassment.

"My dear fellow," Maxime began, without further preamble, "I have to fight a duel to-morrow. Will you act as my second?"

"With whom are you going to fight?"

"With a foreigner whose name I do not know, and on account of a lady of your acquaintance—the beauty of the rink. I saw her this evening at the theatre, invited her to supper, which she accepted, and while we were partaking of it, her protector forced himself into the room."

"Good! I can imagine the scene. You offered him your card; he took it, and carried away the beauty. I would bet any amount that you will never hear of him again. These people come to Paris to amuse themselves, and not to fight duels."

"Even if I don't hear from him, I intend that he shall hear from me. I am resolved to give him a lesson in politeness."

"Bah! if there has been no actual violence I should let the matter drop. You are not in love with the woman, I suppose?"

"Not in the least," replied Maxime, eagerly.

"If you were, that would change matters; but, since you don't care about her, I advise you to wait until her protector comes to demand satisfaction."

"That is what I shall do, perhaps; but, in any case, I depend upon you."

"Excuse me; my time won't be at my disposal for a few days; I shall be in close attendance upon the countess."

"How is that?"

"I have bad news for you. On returning from the Bois, Madame Yalta was attacked by an indisposition which may have the most serious consequences. Her sleigh-ride may cost her dear."

"What, you fear——"

"I fear pleurisy; she shows some alarming symptoms. She realises herself that she is very ill, for she has consented to go to bed, and I only came here in the hope of meeting you. She bade me tell you that she would not be able to see you to-morrow, and, to tell you the truth, I cannot say with any certainty when she will be up and about again."

"You distress me beyond measure, doctor," exclaimed Maxime, really troubled. "I have the greatest sympathy for Madame Yalta, and when I think that I may have been the involuntary cause of this misfortune——"

"Oh, you have no reason to reproach yourself. She would have gone alone, had you not been there. She pays no heed to anything but her fancies."

"But, doctor, are you confident you can save her?"

"Yes; if she will consent to commit no new act of folly. I have prescribed absolute repose, and indeed for several days fever will keep her in bed. But it is the period of convalescence I dread the most. As soon as she is able to sit up, she will think of riding or taking some other violent exercise, the result of which only heaven can foretell. Indeed, the least excitement might kill her. For this reason her friends—and you are one, I am sure—would do her a service by making no attempt to see her until her health is completely re-established."

"I can at least call to inquire after her?"

"Certainly; and I will keep you informed myself, for I am going to lodge at the Avenue de Friedland this evening. I promised the countess

to inform you. I have done so, and I must now return to my patient. So good-by; take my advice, and, if possible, avoid fighting for the dark-eyed girl I unfortunately called your attention to at the rink. She doesn't deserve that any honourable man should risk his life for her."

M. Villagos thereupon went off, leaving Maxime very sorrowful and perplexed; so sorrowful that he no longer thought of seeking seconds, and so perplexed that, on leaving the club, he went home to reflect at his leisure on the new situation that had been brought about by the incidents of that eventful day.

X.

A MONTH has passed. A thaw has come, and so has New Year's-Day, with its obligatory gifts and tiresome congratulations; but Maxime Dorgères has not caught so much as a glimpse of Madame Yalta, and he has seen nothing more of the strange creature who carried off the bracelet. On the morning following the famous supper, Maxime waited until noon for Blue Beard's seconds, but in vain. In the afternoon, regardless of the sage advice of the doctor, he despatched two of his acquaintances to the Rue Jouffroy. They found the house closed, and repeated pulls of the bell proving unavailing, they returned without fulfilling their mission. On the day following, Maxime visited the house of the ogre in person, but was equally unsuccessful in his efforts to obtain admittance. The obliging porter in the house opposite recognised him and came out for the express purpose of telling him that the bear had decamped; that nothing had been seen of him for thirty-six hours; that the neighbours, who hated him, had sent to inform the commissary of police that some crime must have been committed in the mysterious dwelling; and that the commissary had searched it from top to bottom that very morning, but had failed to discover any skeleton or anything indicating a scene of violence. The handsome furniture had not been removed, nor did it show any signs of use, and the sumptuous beds on the upper floors had apparently never been slept in. The bear's quarters, as the neighbours had supposed, were in the cellar, where they found his mattress, bed-clothes, and provisions; among the latter being a hogshead of wine, a barrel of brandy, some hams, and smoked meats from Hamburg.

So the foreigner had gone off as mysteriously as he had come, without any one knowing why; but as the furniture he left behind him would more than suffice to pay the rent, it was not necessary to bestow any further attention upon him. Besides, Maxime then called on the owner of the house, who informed him that having let it on lease for three, six, or nine years, at the tenant's pleasure, and having received three years' rent in advance, he had no reason to feel the slightest anxiety. He gave his tenant's name, but it was composed of so many consonants and such a limited number of vowels, that a French tongue could not master it, and M. Dorgères' nephew had forgotten his Latin. The fellow had doubtless returned to his own country, taking the brunette with him; and Maxime came to the conclusion that Madame Sergent, assisted by the Carpathian bear, had only supped with him for the purpose of obtaining possession of the bracelet. She had accomplished this, and it was not likely that he would ever see her again. The clue was lost, and the birds had flown. They had gone to rejoin their friend the thief, who could now

sleep in peace. She had regained possession of her hand stolen from the Morgue, and also of the jewel that had adorned it.

Though Maxime was disappointed at his defeat, he consoled himself without much difficulty. Besides, he was otherwise occupied. Since he had met that strange countess he could think of no one else, and he had thought of her all the more from the fact that he had not seen her again. The doctor's predictions had been realised. Madame Yalta had been dangerously ill, but M. Villagos now seemed hopeful. The countess had apparently become convalescent; the doctor said that she already evinced a desire to resume her former habits, and Maxime was not a little flattered to learn that she spoke of him, and had on several occasions expressed a desire to see him. Unfortunately, it was necessary to wait for the doctor's permission, and he hesitated to grant it. He entreated Maxime to be patient, and to do or say nothing that could agitate his patient, repeating that the slightest emotion would be fatal. So Maxime waited; but all his thoughts were with the countess, and he began to ask himself if he was not, for the first time in his life, really in love.

There had been many changes in M. Dorgères' establishment. Vignory had been raised to the dignity of a partner; and what was still better, his employer had granted him formal permission to pay his addresses to Mademoiselle Alice, who no longer repulsed him. She, too, had greatly changed. After a few days' seclusion, she had told her father all that had occurred in the Bois de Boulogne. Maxime had risen greatly in the esteem of his uncle, who was infinitely grateful to him for his well-timed interference. To her confession Alice added a promise that filled her father with joy. She told him that Robert de Carnoël no longer existed for her, and that she was ready to obey the paternal wishes in every respect. The banker profited by this opportunity to urge the claims of his young cashier, and Alice had offered no objection to this new suitor. She only asked for time to become acquainted with him; and made her father promise that no further attempt should be made to discover Robert, and that his name should never be uttered in her presence.

All these conditions were willingly accepted. Vignory dined with M. Dorgères every evening, and Alice seemed to begin to appreciate his good qualities, and to welcome him cordially. It looked as if this state of affairs would speedily terminate in a marriage, the more so as Robert de Carnoël had given no sign of life for more than a month. Colonel Borisoff had held several conferences with the banker, and it had been decided that no further attempt should be made to discover the perpetrators of the robbery. The colonel seemed to have become resigned to the loss of his casket, and evinced a great interest in the future happiness of Mademoiselle Dorgères, whose father was grateful for the Russian envoy's kind offices and friendly sentiments. He even thought of inviting him to their Wednesday *soirées*, but Alice objected. The colonel awakened sad memories, and she absolutely refused to see him.

There was still another change in the establishment. Georget's place had been filled by a peasant lad, whom M. Dorgères had summoned from his native village. One morning in December Georget had failed to appear; and on the following day M. Dorgères received a letter from Madame Piriac, announcing that her grandson was in a dying condition. The banker, who was very kind at heart, went at once to the Rue Cardinet, and learned that the lad had been found the night before on the Boulevard de Courcelles, with his arm broken and his skull badly fractured; that he

was delirious, and that they had no hopes of his recovery. M. Dorgères offered the widow a handsome sum of money, which was refused; and Maxime called repeatedly to inquire after the little fellow, who was still alive but unable to speak. The shock he had received had been so great that he had lost his memory, and he was not able to explain how the accident had occurred.

Such was the situation of affairs when one morning after breakfast Maxime started out, as usual, to inquire about Madame Yalta. The news the doctor had given him the evening before had been extremely encouraging, and Maxime's heart was filled with joy; and as joy inclines one to sympathise with the happiness of others, he decided to pass through the Rue de Suresnes and have a chat with Jules Vignory, whom he had not seen for some time. He had completely forgotten the severed hand, Robert de Carnoël, and the brunette of the rink, to think only of this countess whom he had seen merely for a short time one snowy day, but of whom he nevertheless retained a vivid recollection. Everything that was not connected with her mattered little to him now. Why should he feel any anxiety in regard to his friend Vignory and Alice? Vignory was happy, his cousin had recovered from her senseless passion, and they appeared to be gliding tranquilly toward the haven of matrimony. Maxime had even less cause for anxiety in regard to Robert de Carnoël, with whom he was but slightly acquainted, and who, whether guilty or not, had certainly behaved very badly since his suspicious departure. M. de Carnoël surely deserved his fate, and had much less cause to complain than poor little Georget, who was now declared to be rather better.

"I must confer with Vignory about a suitable situation for him when he recovers," thought Maxime, as he reached the gate. This gate was kept open during business hours, and it was necessary to traverse a vaulted passage leading into the courtyard, and then turn to the right to reach the offices. It was here that Maxime and Vignory had met the two individuals, so suspicious in appearance, on the night of the attempted robbery when Maxime had found the severed hand. Evidently the persons who had passed them were the guilty ones, and one of these audacious creatures must have been a woman disguised as a man—the woman he had so vainly sought. The incident now recurred to his mind, and for the first time he reflected that the tall fellow might have been the man of the Rue Jouffroy, though the woman could not have been Madame Sergent, as she had lost neither hand.

"These persons were only subordinates," thought Maxime, "acting in behalf of some one who will never be discovered. The bear took part in the first expedition with a woman who left her hand on the battlefield; he was probably concerned in the second and successful attempt, but the woman who had lost her hand was not. Later, the bear who wished to obtain possession of the bracelet united with the brunette to regain it by soft devices. It was he who sent her to the rink. How could he have known that I was going there that night? A mystery like all the rest! However, the scoundrels who followed me were in his employ, and were to have taken the bracelet from me by force. Failing in this, another attempt was made, and I fell into the trap."

As Maxime passed through the gate he glanced into the porter's room. The door was partially open, and through a cloud of tobacco smoke he saw three men sitting with their backs towards him, and smoking their pipes while they chatted before the fire. Maxime recognised Father

Denlevant, the concierge; Joseph, the valet; and Malicome, the watchman. This sight irritated him, and his first impulse was to break up the conference, and to call these idlers, who were converting the lodge into a lounging place, to account; but a sentence he overheard restrained him. "I repeat that the secretary is as innocent as you or I," said Joseph.

"Then why did he run away?" asked Father Denlevant.

"Because the old man did not want him to marry mademoiselle. But the fellow didn't touch the safe. I would wager my right hand he didn't."

Maxime was thunderstruck. So the robbery was known to all the servants, in spite of the precautions that had been taken to ensure secrecy; and they were discussing Mademoiselle Alice's love affairs in equally familiar terms. However, Maxime restrained his anger, and listened eagerly for what was to follow.

"Still, it is very strange that they didn't set the police on his track," remarked Malicome.

"The old man isn't such a fool. It would have pained his daughter too much. Everybody knew that she was in love with the young man, and she showed her good taste; he is a thousand times handsomer than that prig Vignory."

"But if the handsome secretary is innocent, how is it that nothing has been heard of him?" growled Denlevant.

"Some persons have heard from him," answered Joseph, with an air of importance. "But it is true that nothing has been heard of him for a month, and I have my opinion about that. If he hasn't shown himself, it is because he has been put out of the way--killed, in fact. I am as sure of it as I am that this is a well-coloured pipe."

"It is much more probable that he has sailed for America," exclaimed Malicome. "But I don't believe that he stole the money. Would you like to know who did? Why, it was the little page."

"Georget? Impossible! I'm not over fond of the urchin, for he has played tricks on me many a time, but I don't believe he touched the safe. In the first place, he never stopped longer than six o'clock in the evening."

"No, but he was a sly one. I caught him one morning, about three months ago, asleep on a table. He had slept in the office all night, and he told me that I had shut him up there the evening before. When I remember that I came near losing my place, I'm almost sorry I didn't reveal my suspicions."

"If he did it I am satisfied he was working for some one else," said Joseph, shaking his head, "and if he was picked up half dead in the street, it was probably because some one had an interest in getting him out of the way."

"That's more than likely," assented Malicome.

"Well, I shan't mourn for him," remarked Father Denlevant. "But tell me, Joseph, is it true that mademoiselle's marriage is decided upon? You ought to know."

"Well, as nearly as I can find out, it is to take place in February. But the poor little thing does not look much like a bride. She dares not say no; but she cries every night, her maid tells me."

"Bah! she will soon be consoled," cried Malicome. "It will be a fine thing for the cashier. He came here without a penny and will die a millionaire."

"That won't make him generous," exclaimed Joseph. "He won't squander his fortune. I've never seen the colour of his money since he

came here. The old man isn't generous, but he isn't as stingy as the cashier."

Maxime hesitated an instant. He felt an intense desire to burst into the room and distribute a few blows among these tattlers, but he soon came to the conclusion that it would not be wise to commit himself, so he passed on unnoticed. Certain assertions that still resounded in his ears fairly astonished and perplexed him. These servants had settled opinions in regard to Robert de Carnoël and Georget; and it was the conviction of the majority that the secretary had been unjustly accused, and that Georget was implicated in the theft. Joseph also asserted that Robert had been despatched to another world, and that Georget's injuries were not the result of an accident, but had been inflicted by accomplices who were anxious to reduce him to silence.

"What if that were true?" thought Maxime. "In that case, I should have committed two blunders; first, in assuring my cousin of her lover's unworthiness, and secondly, in interesting myself in a young rascal who was the cause of all the trouble. But it can't be true. Joseph regrets the loss of the gratuities he formerly received from Monsieur de Carnoël for bearing his clandestine messages to Alice, and which more than sufficed to convince the man of Robert's innocence. As for Georget, he is a sharp little rascal, and perhaps he knows more than he pretends; but there is a great difference between that and robbing my uncle's safe. Still, when I see the countess again, I will ask her if she is quite sure of her *protégé's* honesty."

He pushed open the door of the outer office, where he perceived a few persons waiting, and passed on into the cashier's sanctum, where he found Vignory engaged in writing a letter. His face was radiant, and he seemed almost inclined to throw himself into the arms of Maxime, as is the custom on the stage when one has any good news to communicate. The presence of the clerks caused him to moderate his transports, but he soon led his friend into a little room adjoining the office, which had formerly served as a receptacle for old papers, but which, since his change of fortune, he had fitted up, so that he might sometimes withdraw from the presence of his subordinates. He took the precaution to close the door, then seized hold of Maxime's hands and pressed them convulsively.

"So it is true that you are to be my cousin?" said young Dorgères, amply enlightened by this demonstration.

"What! Then you know——"

"I *know* nothing, but I can guess. You wear the air of a conqueror!"

"I am the happiest of men."

"Dispense with these ecstatic phrases, and tell me plainly what has happened."

"Oh, that will not take long. Last evening I dined with your uncle, and afterwards, as he became absorbed in reading the bye-laws of a new financial company, while Madame Martineau fell asleep by the chimney-corner, Mademoiselle Alice and I found ourselves *tête-à-tête*."

"I hope you seized on the opportunity to make an eloquent declaration of love."

"I was about to try, but Mademoiselle Alice did not give me time to speak. She said this in substance, if not in so many words: 'Monsieur Vignory, I know that you love me; I appreciate your many good qualities. On a recent occasion you showed that you had a good heart, for you undertook the defence of an unfortunate friend. I entertain great esteem

for you, and I know that my father desires me to marry you. I authorise you to ask him for my hand."

"Hum ! Not a very enthusiastic consent, by any means. What did you reply to this very straightforward discourse ? You accepted, of course ?"

"Can you doubt it ?"

"No ; you are sensible enough to make a sensible marriage."

"And a love match too. Mademoiselle Dorgères is charming. I have loved her, in secret, for two years without daring to confess it."

"You are not the only one."

Vignory coloured slightly, and Maxime, who never concealed his thoughts, continued : "Don't imagine that I am trying to discourage you ; but I must tell you what I really think. My little cousin is sincere when she says that she esteems you, and that she has decided to become Madame Vignory. I am even strongly inclined to think that she will eventually love you, and that you will, in time, be a fondly-cherished husband ; but don't forget that she has passionately loved a young man who would have married her if he had not been unfortunate. Your position is an extremely delicate one."

"I know it, but that does not frighten me."

"So much the better. Were I in your place I should be a little jealous of the past ; and, besides, there are moments when I ask myself if Monsieur de Carnoël has not been unjustly accused."

This time the young cashier turned pale. "He would have returned had he been innocent," he murmured.

"Unless he happened to be dead."

"Dead ! What can have put such an idea into your head ?"

"In passing the porter's lodge just now I overheard a very singular conversation. Joseph and Malicome were advancing the opinion that Monsieur de Carnoël had been assassinated."

"That's absurd. Robert has left France ; there can be no doubt of it."

"Are you sure ? He was in Paris just one week after the robbery. I saw him in a carriage on the Boulevard Malesherbes ; afterwards he suddenly disappeared. This seems singular."

"On the contrary, it can be easily explained. He first went to Brittany, and after remaining there two or three days, returned here. Colonel Borisoff has proof of this."

"That Russian does not inspire me with much confidence. You certainly have not been guilty of the folly of allying yourself with him ?"

"I ! Certainly not. But he has visited your uncle frequently of late, and naturally we have spoken of poor Robert ; that's all. But what are you driving at ?"

"I mean, Jules, that this affair does not even seem as clear to me as formerly, and that I begin to think the real culprits have not yet been discovered. I have told you how the bracelet was stolen from me. There is some mystery in all this. For instance, it has never occurred to either of us that Georget might have done it, and yet the servants declare it was he."

"Georget, your *protégé*, whom you recommended so highly to Monsieur Dorgères ?"

"Oh, I don't give much credence to the assertions of these fellows ; but I have always thought that the thief had an accomplice in the house, and Georget came and went at all hours. He knew Malicome's habits,

too. Might he not have secreted himself somewhere, and opened the gate for the rogues at an hour when no one was about?"

"Secrete himself! Where? There was no place where he could do so except this closet, and at that time it was so crammed with papers that no one could have entered it. But why should we bring up this mournful subject? I was so pleased to announce my marriage to you, and hoped you would share my joy; but instead of doing so, you talk of a man who *was* my friend, and whom I defended as long as it was possible to defend him, but for whose return it isn't natural I should desire."

"Forgive me," exclaimed Maxime, touched at once by this appeal to his feelings; "I am a stupid fool, and you are a thousand times better than I am. The devil only knows why I still take an interest in these people. But all's well that ends well, and I am delighted to hear that you are going to marry Alice. I will be your best man; and now I give you my word that I will say no more about Monsieur de Carnoël."

In this promise to make no further allusion to his friend's former rival, Maxime was perfectly sincere. With that mobility of feeling which was one of his greatest faults, Maxime had almost allowed himself to believe in the rash assertions of a valet and office-boy; but he already regretted that he had permitted himself to be influenced by them, and was really sorry that he had distressed his best friend by reviving unpleasant memories, instead of rejoicing with him over a marriage which he heartily approved.

On leaving his uncle's house he started to pay his daily visit to M. Villagos at Madame Yalta's magnificent mansion. The servants there now knew this assiduous visitor, and he was received every day in the same manner. A herculean porter met him at the entrance, announced him by a peal of the bell, and gave him in charge of a footman, who conducted him to a reception-room on the ground floor. Almost immediately the doctor entered, conversed with him on the countess's condition, and then accompanied him to the hall door. The interview never lasted more than five minutes, and Maxime, on re-crossing the courtyard, never encountered any one but the servants. On this occasion he had scarcely entered the room when Dr. Villagos made his appearance. He had a thoughtful air, and the banker's nephew feared for a moment that he brought bad news of his patient. "Well," inquired the young man anxiously, "have you come to tell me of a relapse?"

"No, thank heaven," replied Villagos. "Her strength is returning, and I am now confident that she will recover."

"I am delighted to hear it. You seemed so preoccupied that I thought——"

"She is cured of her malady, but I am not completely re-assured."

"You fear some act of imprudence, you mean. I hope, my dear doctor, that you will use your authority to prevent it."

"Most assuredly. This morning the countess wished to drive out, but I opposed it, and she was obliged to submit. But I am not able to ensure her repose of mind. Her imagination is constantly at work; she is beset with a thousand fancies, and among them a very odd one. You told her, it seems, that your uncle's former secretary was in love with your cousin, Mademoiselle Dorgères, who loved him in return, and that he had been sent away."

"I beg your pardon, I did not tell her that. It was Madame Yalta who first spoke of it to me on the day I accompanied her to the Bois. I even attempted to deceive her in the matter."

"You did not succeed. She is convinced that the young man's misfortunes are unmerited. Monsieur de Carnoël's father was a friend of Madame Yalta's, which is quite enough to make her espouse the cause of the son. Remember that she is ignorant of what has taken place at Monsieur Dorgères' house; she merely imagines that there are two unhappy lovers. That is enough for her, and she has sworn to make them happy."

"But my cousin no longer cares for Monsieur de Carnoël. She is going to marry my uncle's partner in a month's time. I am truly sorry that Madame Yalta should have attached any importance to the gossip of a mere child, for you don't perhaps know that the information was given to her by little Georget."

"He will give her no more," interrupted M. Villagos; "the poor boy has been the victim of a terrible accident, and he has become an idiot, or nearly so."

"What, doctor, do you think he will remain in his present condition?"

"I fear so; I pity him with all my heart. But, my dear sir, I have a request to make of you."

"Speak, doctor, and believe that I am entirely at your service."

"I beg that when you see the countess you will avoid all subjects of an agitating nature. She will endeavour to speak of this matter in which she is so greatly interested; promise me to do all in your power to change the conversation."

"That's agreed. But you speak as if I were about to have the happiness of seeing Madame Yalta."

"You are. She is determined to see you this very morning. She knew that you would call to-day as usual, and she requested me to tell you that she desired to thank you in person for the interest you have displayed during her illness. She is the more grateful for your visits since her other friends have been rather neglectful—at least she thinks so, though she is entirely mistaken. It was I who spread the report everywhere that she had returned to the South; and I will not disguise the fact that I should have preferred not to have her receive you this morning. I always fear any excitement for her. But you have just re-assured me, and I shall content myself with reminding you that you have promised to avoid the topic I dread."

"I repeat the promise, and besides, you will help me in doing so."

"No, for I shall not be there. I have other patients whom I have neglected too much of late, and who require my attention. Moreover, the countess would prefer to see you alone."

This arrangement was very satisfactory to Maxime, though politeness obliged him to assure M. Villagos to the contrary. The doctor knew the real sentiments of his young friend; but he contented himself with smiling, then took him familiarly by the arm, and escorted him to the staircase that led to the private apartments of the countess. There they found a footman who, at a sign from the doctor, preceded the visitor to show him the way. The doctor's last words as he left Maxime were: "Do not forget my instructions."

Maxime was firmly resolved to obey them; the more so as he had no desire to waste any of the time the countess might grant him in discussing the affairs of others. On the floor above, he was received by a maid-servant, who, after conducting him through several apartments, which

contained so many works of art that they resembled the halls of a museum, at last softly opened a door, and instead of announcing him, motioned him to enter. He did so, and found himself in a room which was so dimly lighted that he could at first only imperfectly distinguish the objects it contained, and he paused upon the threshold without daring to advance.

The room was oval in form, and lighted from above. The walls were of polished *faience*, in the Oriental style, and a broad-cushioned divan extended entirely around the room. In the centre were some enormous baskets of flowers and clumps of camellias. There was no sign of any fireplace, and yet a gentle warmth and penetrating perfume pervaded the apartment, which seemed more like a harem than an invalid's chamber. The astonished Maxime discovered that the door had closed behind him, and supposed that the maid had left him to go and warn her mistress. He advanced, however, and when he had passed the plants which gave the place the aspect of a conservatory, he suddenly found himself face to face with Madame Yalta, who was half reclining on a pile of cushions, with a large white bear-skin covering her to the shoulders. She was paler than formerly, but still more beautiful, perhaps, with that strange loveliness which reveals itself only to persons sufficiently intelligent to appreciate the irresistible charm of an expressive face, and Maxime remained mute with suspense and emotion.

"I was waiting for you," she said, in a tone that touched his inmost soul. "You are welcome." And at the same time she extended a lovely hand, which he dared not kiss, but which he pressed warmly.

"If you only knew how rejoiced I am to see you again," he exclaimed.

"I do know," replied the lady, "and I beg you to believe that it was only because the doctor absolutely forbade it that I did not receive you sooner. Oh! that doctor; I have hated him many a time!"

"And I bless him, since he has saved you."

"Yes, I was near death, but my time had not come, and, thank God, I am now out of danger."

"So the doctor told me."

"I am sure he added that I should have a relapse if I committed the slightest imprudence. If I listened to him, I should be obliged to make up my mind not to leave the house or see any one before the spring. But I told him this morning that I was now determined to resume my former habits, and to begin with, I insisted upon seeing a friend. Would you believe that he tried to forbid it. Had I listened to him, you would not be here now; but you *are* here, so sit down and let us have a talk."

In place of chairs Maxime only saw a pile of soft cushions, and though unacquainted with Oriental customs, he succeeded in establishing himself quite comfortably; but he did not find it so easy to begin a conversation; and the countess probably understood his embarrassment, for she said gaily: "I have formed many plans during my enforced seclusion, and not a few projects of reform. The life I am leading has become tiresome, and I have resolved to change it."

"Do you think of leaving Paris? If I feared that——"

"Have no fears. If I go away, I shall soon return. But I have discovered that excitement is not happiness, and instead of wasting my life in gratifying my caprices, I dream of being happy after the fashion of the quiet middle-classes, who are content with the pleasures of home."

"Allow me to say that you perhaps place too high an estimate on

these pleasures," interrupted Maxime, laughing. "If you knew them as I know them——"

"It is precisely because I do not know them that I should like to do so. I live in a sphere where people think only of pleasure, and I long to leave this circle, and I depend upon you to help me a little."

This beginning surprised Maxime considerably, and though he was no coxcomb, he could not help wondering if she were going to propose a quiet life in some retired spot with him. He showed his astonishment so plainly that Madame Yalta began to laugh, and hastened to explain her intentions more clearly. "I see that you do not understand me very well," she remarked, "and you could scarcely foresee the conversion I have just announced. Still, it is very sincere. The mad countess you have known no longer exists; I have taken a vow to live simply, and to aid me in the accomplishment of this vow I desire to connect myself with some patriarchal family. I can't think of an adjective that expresses my meaning better."

"Such families are rare in Paris, or at least it would be necessary to search for them in a circle——"

"Unlike my own—I am well aware of it. But such families exist, for I know one—yours."

"Mine? But I have none. I was left an orphan very early in life. I only have an uncle——"

"And a cousin. It is to them I allude. Monsieur Dorgères, as you are perhaps aware, is my banker. Our relations up to the present time have been purely business ones, but I have seen enough of him to appreciate the rectitude of his character and his frankness, and I have often regretted that my acquaintance with him was not more intimate. This was on my mind when the doctor happily brought you here, and now I feel most desirous of knowing those who are dear to you—your uncle and his daughter, whom I have scarcely seen. I am attracted towards her by a feeling I can scarcely define, and I have resolved to ask Monsieur Dorgères to present me to her."

"He would be delighted to gratify you," stammered Maxime, who had not expected an overture of this kind, "only Alice is still very young——"

"And I am so no longer," interrupted the countess. "That is true, I am twenty-nine, ten years older than Mademoiselle Dorgères, I believe; and I have lived and suffered, while she is still at the age of illusions. Ah, well! it is precisely this contrast that makes me desire to become her friend. I have always dreamed of gaining the affection of a young girl, and of deserving her confidence by working for her happiness and aiding her by my advice. I have gained, at no little expense, considerable experience in life, and I should like to contribute to the happiness of a pure girl, whom I might love like a sister."

"My cousin would be very proud to hear you say this, and I assure you that she is worthy of the interest you feel in her; but allow me to remind you that her life is already marked out for her, and will undoubtedly be a happy and tranquil one. She is about to marry."

"What! her father has consented to accept Monsieur de Carnoël as a son-in-law?"

Maxime bit his lips. He had spoken hastily, and he recollected only when it was too late that he had already broken his promise to Dr. Villagos. Still, it was necessary to make some response, and he could

not disguise the truth. "No, madame," he answered, with evident embarrassment, "my cousin is to marry her father's partner, a most estimable young man, and my intimate friend, Jules Vignory."

"But you told me yourself that she loved Monsieur de Carnoël?"

"She thought so. At the age of nineteen a girl may be mistaken in regard to her real sentiments," replied Maxime, with a forced smile.

The countess was looking at him attentively with her large clear eyes, and seemed to be reading his secret thoughts. Then came a pause which made him feel extremely ill at ease. He was enraged with himself for having referred to the tabooed subject, in spite of all his good resolutions.

"I am going to speak to you very plainly," resumed Madame Yalta, slowly. "You have not forgotten, I suppose, the conversation we had together that cold day?"

"How could I have forgotten it? That day will ever be memorable in my life, since it was the day I had the happiness of speaking to you for the first time," said Maxime, eagerly seizing on this opportunity to allude to his personal interests.

"Then you recollect that it was my *protégé*, Georget, who first informed me of what had taken place at your uncle's house?"

"Madame," began Maxime, after some hesitation, "Georget talked at random, like a child as he is. He was very fond of my uncle's secretary; he imagined the young man was to marry my cousin, and he was inconsolable when Monsieur de Carnoël left the house."

"He left it because Monsieur Dorgères sent him away. You told me so yourself, and gave me to understand that he had been guilty of some dishonourable act before his departure. Georget told me even more. He said that a robbery had been committed at your uncle's, and that Monsieur de Carnoël was supposed to be guilty." Maxime started with surprise. "You see that I am well informed," continued the countess, "I know all that took place. I know that the safe was opened with a false key, and that a casket belonging to a Russian named Borisoff was taken. I also know how the robbery was discovered; Georget was there and told me all. The cashier summoned Monsieur Dorgères, who, on learning that his secretary had precipitately departed the night before, did not hesitate to declare that this young man was the culprit; in short, I know everything."

"Except the affair of the severed hand," thought Maxime. "If she knew that, she would certainly speak of it."

"Ah, well," resumed Madame Yalta, "I am positive that Monsieur de Carnoël is innocent, and I entreat you to tell me what passed between him and Mademoiselle Dorgères in the Bois de Boulogne. You were present at their interview, and I hope you will not refuse to answer me."

Maxime felt that, having gone so far, it would be puerile to resort to a subterfuge. "Monsieur de Carnoël did not come to the rendezvous he had appointed."

The countess turned pale, and asked, in an agitated voice: "Is that really true?"

"I swear it, upon my honour!"

"And have you heard nothing of him since?"

"No; he has had the good taste not to write to my cousin."

"And receiving no news of him, Mademoiselle Dorgères has come to the conclusion that this silence is a confession of guilt, and that Monsieur de Carnoël has renounced her *because* he is guilty. She has condemned

him without a hearing, and yet if he has not re-appeared it is because he is not free."

"I do not know whether he is free, but I do know that he is in Paris, or at least that he was there on the day I waited for him on the Route des Bouleaux. I saw him that very morning in a superb carriage on the Boulevard Malesherbes. Perhaps he decided to cross the frontier."

"I don't believe that. I believe he has been put out of the way, so that he cannot appear and vindicate himself. I trust that he has not been murdered; but he may have fallen into the hands of people who had an interest in his disappearance."

"The real culprits, in other words. Do you think they have him in confinement?"

"Possibly; but if he is living I shall find him. Do you understand now why I wish to make the acquaintance of Mademoiselle Dorgères?"

"Not very clearly, I must confess," replied Maxime, timidly.

"Do you not see that I have vowed to break off a marriage which would make her unhappy for life; for sooner or later Monsieur de Carnoël's innocence will be established, and I count upon your help to establish it."

"Mine! You wish me to help you in this impossible undertaking—I, who am firmly convinced of Monsieur de Carnoël's guilt?"

"Your conviction will change, I am sure of it," replied the countess, unmoved by this protestation.

"I hope so with all my heart, for I have not the slightest personal hostility toward Monsieur de Carnoël. And yet I must admit that I don't wish my cousin's marriage broken off. I cannot forget that the man she is to marry is my best friend."

"I know it. But don't you think that you would give him a better proof of your friendship by preventing a marriage that would cause him everlasting regret? Think of his situation, if, after this marriage, Monsieur de Carnoël, whom your cousin has loved with all the ardour of a first love, should re-appear completely vindicated. If she has renounced him, it is only because she believes he has committed an infamous act; but she has not forgotten him. I am a woman, and I understand a woman's heart. Be assured that Mademoiselle Dorgères, weary of struggling against a passion that alarms her, seeks a refuge in marriage, hoping to find rest and peace. But she will discover, when it is too late, that she is mistaken, and she will curse, all the rest of her days, the tie she is now so eager to contract."

The countess spoke with so much enthusiasm, and her eyes were so eloquent, that Maxime was impressed in spite of himself. He was not convinced, by any means; but he was perplexed, like a judge who has just listened to the defence of a great criminal by a very skilful lawyer. At the same time he was mortified to discover that he held a very insignificant place in Madame Yalta's thoughts, and that her desire to see him was entirely due to the fact that she wished to talk about M. de Carnoël. He could not understand why she should so warmly espouse the cause of a person she had never seen; her own father's former acquaintance with Robert's father seeming a totally inadequate reason under the circumstances. A new idea suddenly occurred to him. It was Georget who had related all this to the countess; Georget, whom the servants almost unanimously accused. Might not one reasonably suppose that he had confessed his guilt to his protectress? In such a case, Madame Yalta's conduct would

be the most natural thing in the world. She would not denounce Georget ; but she would feel it her duty to repair the evil caused by the young rascal she had recommended.

"May I count upon you ?" the countess insisted, after allowing Maxime a moment for reflection.

Maxime was carried away by the new idea that had entered his mind. "Unreservedly !" he exclaimed, with an enthusiasm he could not restrain. "Tell me what I am to do, and your orders shall be executed."

"I ask you first to help me in finding Monsieur de Carnoël."

"I ask nothing better ; but I don't know how to set about the search."

"I am going to tell you. You have spoken of the lad I placed at your uncle's. He is a very bright little fellow, and was very fond of Monsieur de Carnoël. I am certain he would have succeeded in discovering him, or at least in telling us what had become of the unfortunate young man, if he had not been the victim of an accident, the cause of which is still unknown to me. However, he is already upon his feet again, though he has not yet recovered his memory. But that will be restored, and to restore it I thought of you."

Maxime opened his eyes in astonishment.

"Oh, I know you are not a physician," the countess resumed, laughing, "and I don't expect you to treat the poor boy according to the rules of the faculty. Monsieur Villagos has already done all that can be done in that respect, and he has succeeded in curing him physically. But his task is finished and yours is to begin. Georget is very much attached to you, is he not ?"

"Yes ; he proved it very recently. Some weeks ago I was followed one night by some persons who intended to rob me, and I owe my escape from them entirely to his help."

"Well, you could not show your gratitude in any better way than by paying him a visit."

"I have called three times during his illness, but his grandmother would not allow me to see him."

"She will not oppose it if you tell her that you came at my request. And so that she may not doubt the truth of the assertion, take and show her this ring. Madame Piriac has very singular ideas. She was born in a position far superior to that which she now occupies ; and her pride is almost fierce in its intensity. She never comes here, but she always follows my instructions in memory of my father's kindness to her son. This ring is a sort of talisman which will ensure her obedience when I have anything to ask of her. Show it to her, and tell her that I beg she will leave you alone with Georget, and trust you as she would trust me."

"Very well ; but what shall I say to the lad ?"

"Anything that may seem likely to awaken his mental faculties and restore his memory. Remind him of the unfortunate story of Mademoiselle Dorgères and Monsieur de Carnoël, which he seems to have completely forgotten. If you don't succeed in eliciting any information at your first visit, make a second one. I am satisfied that you will accomplish the task far better than I. Georget is very fond of me, but I intimidate him. Besides, I have another motive. Dr. Villagos forbids everything under pretext of avoiding dangerous emotion. If he knew that I had taken it into my head to help the two lovers, he would be incensed beyond measure."

"I can readily believe that ; for before permitting me to see you, he

made me promise not to say a single word respecting Monsieur de Carnoël or Georget; and heaven is my witness that it is not my fault if I have broken my word."

"Well, my plans must remain a secret between us two. And now that our treaty is concluded—now that you are my friend and ally, forgive me if I entreat you not to lose a moment in seeing Georget."

Maxime rose. He understood that this was a polite dismissal, and yet he waited for one more word or look. It seemed to him he deserved something more than this friendly farewell. "Do you think I should speak in this way if you were indifferent to me?" resumed Madame Yalta, who read his thoughts. And her eyes said still more. Maxime was about to fall upon his knees, but the maid entered just in time to prevent a rather premature demonstration. "*Au revoir*," added the countess, with an encouraging smile. "I hope you will not keep me waiting long for your next visit, and perhaps I shall soon have the pleasure of meeting you at your uncle's, for my first visit will be paid to his charming daughter."

XI.

UNTIL he had left Madame Yalta's residence, Maxime succeeded in retaining the decorous manner of a gentleman who had just paid a morning call; but no sooner did he find himself on the pavement, out of sight of the majestic porter, than he began to talk and gesticulate like a madman or a poet, the two classes of men that lovers most resemble. This time his heart as well as his head acknowledged Madame Yalta's supremacy, and if she had ordered him to jump into the Seine he would have obeyed her without the slightest hesitation.

Fortunately, she had only sent him to Madame Piriac's; still, Maxime deserved some credit for performing her mission, as it was contrary to the sage resolutions he had formed with a thorough knowledge of the subject, and forgotten in a quarter of an hour. It was actual treason to his friend Vignory, and yet he felt no remorse. What were the obligations of friendship now? All the sentiments that had animated him melted like wax in the heat of growing passion.

Besides, the whole affair was shrouded in mystery, and one might easily be mistaken. He decided that a supplementary investigation would be advantageous for Alice, who must not be allowed to marry out of pique, if her former lover was not unworthy of her. M. Dorgères could not blame his nephew for repairing an act of cruel injustice; nor could Vignory owe him any ill-will for resuscitating a rival whom the poor cashier never could have supplanted had he still been in the field. Besides, he had a nice bit of consolation, since his employer had just elevated him to the rank of partner. Having quieted his scruples by these specious arguments, Maxime unhesitatingly leaped into a cab and bade the coachman drive to the Rue Cardinet. He alighted at the corner of the Boulevard Malesherbes, found Madame Piriac's house without difficulty, and entered it with a deliberate step. The passage was as dark as ever, and through the glass door Maxime saw Georget's grandmother sewing in the chimney-corner. He ventured to open the door without knocking, whereupon Madame Piriac, who instantly recognised him, sprang up as if to intercept him.

"Madame," he began, undaunted by this reception, "I beg you will

excuse the liberty I have taken, but I have called several times to see Georget, and you have never done me the honour to receive me. To-day I force my way in, for reasons I will explain if you will listen."

Maxime spoke in the most respectful tone he knew how to assume, in order to show the grandmother of the page that he was not so obtuse as to take her for a real concierge. She probably guessed his intentions, for she replied as if she were nothing more than the humble guardian of an artisan's abode. "You are mistaken, my good sir," she said. "Any one can enter my room, and, if you have not seen my boy, it is only because the physician has forbidden visitors. The lad has been very ill, and he is so still; he is not yet in a position to talk."

"Not even with the Countess Yalta?"

Madame Piriac gave a slight start, which did not escape Maxime, but she replied, without much embarrassment: "That lady certainly will not come here, whatever interest she may feel in my poor child; but if she *does* come, I shall ask her to refrain from seeing him."

"She will not come, but she has sent me."

"I was not aware that she knew you."

"I left her scarcely an hour ago, and she particularly requested me to see Georget, and even to take him out for a walk."

"My dear sir, the countess is probably ignorant that the child is still unconscious of what he says; the shock he received has affected his mind, and the doctor does not wish him to be allowed to go out at present."

"The countess foresaw these objections, madame, and to prove that she has charged me to overcome them she gave me this ring."

Madame Piriac turned pale, and looked at the banker's nephew with intense astonishment. "You are the first one to whom she ever entrusted that ring," she murmured. "What is her motive in doing so, and what does she wish of me?"

"Madame Yalta is extremely anxious to learn the fate of a young man who mysteriously disappeared about a month ago—a young man named Robert de Carnoël."

"Monsieur Dorgères' secretary! He was very kind to Georget, who has often spoken of him to me."

"Georget has also spoken of him to the countess, and that is why the idea of making the child of service in the search occurred to her."

"She forgets that he has lost his memory."

"She hopes it will be restored to him, and to effect this, some unforeseen circumstance will be necessary, or some chance that I shall try to bring about, if you will allow Georget to accompany me. Don't you think, madame, that the sight of certain places or certain persons might arouse his dormant faculties?"

Madame Piriac seemed to be reflecting deeply, and Maxime fancied she was hesitating between the necessity of obeying a will of which she stood in awe and the fear of injuring her grandson. "Is Monsieur Dorgères aware of Madame Yalta's plans?" she asked, after a long silence.

"No," was the quick response; "and I shall not say a word to him on the subject."

"May I ask if the countess told you from whom she obtained the ring you have just shown me?"

"I have received no information whatever on the subject; she merely gave it to me to indicate that I came at her request."

"I believe you, sir. You are an honourable man, and you would not

deceive a poor woman. Forgive me, if I ask you one more question : Will you swear that whatever the result of the search you are undertaking may be, no harm shall come to Georget ? ”

“ I give you my word of honour that the boy shall not be compromised in any way, whatever happens. No one knows that he is in any way connected with the affair, except the countess and myself. She wishes to find Monsieur de Carnoël, and it is sufficient for me to know that she does wish it to help her by all the means in my power. ”

“ Sir, ” said Madame Piriac, who was evidently impressed by this language, “ pardon me for having hesitated before entrusting you with what is dearest to me in this world ; but I hesitate no longer, and will summon Georget. ”

She had scarcely uttered her grandson's name, when the child darted into the room through a doorway concealed by a tapestry hanging. He had evidently heard the last words uttered by his grandmother, and in order to have heard them he must have been quite near. At first, Maxime wondered if the cunning urchin had not heard the entire conversation, but he was soon undeceived. Georget opened his eyes in astonishment on perceiving his employer's nephew, and his face expressed such unfeigned surprise that it was impossible to suspect him of acting. “ Why, Monsieur Maxime ! ” he exclaimed, rapturously.

“ Yes, my little fellow, it is I, ” replied the young man, tapping him on the cheek. “ You were not expecting to see me to-day, were you ? ”

“ No, but I can guess why you have come, all the same. Monsieur Dorgères sent you to pull my ears because I was not at the office yesterday. ”

Maxime looked at the lad and saw that he was paler than formerly, and that his face and body were much thinner, but his eyes were as bright and his mouth as laughing as ever ; and had it not been that his arm was still in a sling, no one would have supposed that he had just recovered from a serious illness. “ Your ears are perfectly safe, my boy, ” said Maxime. “ My uncle did not send me here to scold you. He knows it is no fault of yours if you have been absent from the office for a month. ”

“ What, has it been a month since I was at the office ? ” exclaimed Georget. “ It's true, I have been on my back ever since—since the big snowstorm. In that case, New Year's-day has passed. ”

“ Never mind, you shall have your gifts all the same. I came for you to go with me to buy them. ”

“ That's very kind of you. I have always told my grandmother that you were very kind to me. I should like a box of *bonbons* to drive away the taste of all the horrid medicine I have been taking. ”

“ You shall have all the *bonbons* you like if Madame Piriac doesn't object. ”

“ Grandmamma, I assure you the doctor hasn't forbidden me to eat sugar candy. ”

“ But he has forbidden you to talk too much, ” his grandmother said, so quickly that Maxime wondered if she did not wish to prevent the child from mentioning the physician, who must be none other than M. Villagos.

“ Yes, ” answered Georget, “ but he will allow me to go out for a walk. He told me yesterday that I did not take enough exercise, and that I might begin to use my arm again. And I'm glad of it ; for I've received a challenge from a fellow at Levallois, and I should like to give him a sound drubbing. ”

“ Here, here, ” said Maxime, with affected sternness, “ I shall pull your

ears if you talk about fighting. After your late experience I should not think you would feel inclined to begin over again. It was in a scrape of this kind, I suppose, that you became disabled a month ago."

"To tell the truth, Monsieur Maxime, I do not know, for I can remember nothing at all about it."

"That is only too true," interposed Madame Piriac. "I have questioned him again and again with no result. The doctor assures me that his injuries could only be the result of a fall. But where, and how did he fall? We don't know; but it must have been a terrible one, for he was brought home unconscious, and did not recover his senses for ten hours."

"The open air will do him good," said Maxime. "It is a lovely day, and if you don't object I will take my young friend out."

"Not for long, I hope, sir," said Madame Piriac.

"Oh, we will be back before dark, and I need not say that if he seems fatigued we will return at once; we can take a cab, of course."

The grandmother made no objection, thanks to the all-powerful talisman, and the pair had scarcely reached the street when the lad raised his head, and sniffed the air like a young horse that has not left the stable for a long time. "How nice it is to be out again?" he exclaimed, "and not to be going to the office, for we are not going there, are we?"

"Certainly not," answered Maxime, gaily. "Do you fancy I came after you to make you do penance?"

"How glad I am! If you knew how time drags when I am shut up between four walls! You musn't tell grandmammina, of course, but sometimes, when I could stand it no longer, I used to run round to the Madeleine and play marbles with the other boys, only for ten minutes or so. But if Monsieur Vignory had known it——"

"Bah! he would not have said anything. He's very good-natured."

"Possibly, but he does not laugh much. With you, now, and with Monsieur Robert, I'm not afraid. You wouldn't have told tales about me to the governor."

"Is it long since you have seen Monsieur Robert?" asked Maxime, quickly.

"No—that is to say—wait—the last time I saw him was—upon my word! I can't remember when I *did* see him. I only know that he passed by me into the office. I took off my cap to him, and he bade me good-morning."

"That was a month ago—the day before his departure, probably."

"He has gone away, then. How very strange! Where has he gone?"

Maxime made no reply, he was thinking: "This loss of memory is even more complete than I supposed."

"Wait!" exclaimed Georget, suddenly, "here we are at the Boulevard Malesherbes, and there are some booths up already. It cannot be far from New Year's-day."

"It's over, my boy," said Maxime, sadly. "You forget that I came to take you to purchase your New Year's gifts. I told you so just now, before your grandmother. Your head doesn't seem to be quite steady yet."

"No; it feels very strangely. I should like to describe how it feels, but I can't."

"You can try."

"Well, you see, Monsieur Maxime, there are times when it seems to me that my brain is numbed. I try to think and can't. At such times I

'can't even tell my own name. It seems to me that dozens of ideas come knocking at the door at once. Then it is like being at the theatre when the curtain rises. I see a host of things I never saw before, and all the people I ever knew file by before me. Then everything becomes confused again, and at last fades away altogether. It seems to me I have been dreaming; what, I don't know."

Maxime listened with eager attention. It was evident that the boy's intellect had been only partially destroyed; and even memory, which had suffered most, still returned at fleeting intervals. Perhaps it might be stimulated if the child was brought into the presence of those he had known before his accident; and Maxime decided to take him to the Rue de Suresnes, and confront him with the servants and clerks there, and especially Vignory. They were but a few steps from the Rue Jouffroy, and a sudden impulse impelled him to go that way in order to see if Georget would recognise it. As soon as they left the Boulevard Malesherbes, he prepared for the effort he had in contemplation.

"Have you ever been to the skating-rink since the night I saw you there?" he asked.

"To the rink! No, I never go there."

"But I thought you spent all your evenings in doing errands there; you told me so yourself."

"If I did, I wasn't telling the truth. But it does seem to me I was there once."

"I certainly saw you there; and, after you left, you did me a great service. Don't you remember that I left the hall with a lady, and that you followed me as far as the corner of the Avenue de Villiers and the Rue Jouffroy? You know the Rue Jouffroy well, do you not?"

"I should think I did. It is the first street on the left; I can see the sign from here."

"We are at the very place where I took a cab, which you had seen approaching in the distance, and the rascals who were pursuing me were outwitted."

"Yes, there were three of them," murmured Georget; "I knew they meant to stop you as soon as you left the street."

"How did you know?" asked Maxime, quickly.

"I can't tell you; but I recollect that I promised myself to prevent them from hurting you. I'm not very big, but I could have tripped them up one after another before they had laid a hand on you."

"And do you remember the lady who was with me—a brunette, with large eyes? She told me her name was Madame Sergent."

"Madame Sergent! I don't know her. What a droll name, though! Why not say Madame Corporal?"

On reaching the Rue Jouffroy, Maxime inquired, with well-feigned indifference: "Do you often come this way in going to the office?"

"That depends," replied Georget; "it is a shorter way by the Boulevard Malesherbes, but sometimes I go the longest way—by the Avenue de Villiers, Boulevard de Courcelles, and through the Avenue de Messine, where I usually find some boys to play with."

"Then it was in one of these streets that your accident occurred?"

"Probably."

"Should you recognise the spot if I took you to it?"

"I don't think so. Grandmother says I was picked up on the Boulevard de Courcelles, and that I was lying on the rails of the tramway-line. I

did not deposit myself there, that is certain ; so some one else must have done so."

Just then they reached the house occupied by the mysterious Madame Sergeant. Maxime paused and looked at it. "That's a nice house," he remarked. "I think I should like it better than my quarters in the Rue de Châteaudun. The shutters are closed, and it looks as if it were to let. You live in the neighbourhood, do you know whom it belongs to?"

Georget did not respond ; he was scrutinising the house with profound attention, and he passed his hand over his forehead—the usual gesture when one is attempting to catch a fleeting idea. "No, no !" he exclaimed at last ; "it isn't to let, although it's shut up ; some one lives there."

"Who?"

"Ladislas, the red horseman—the man who trains the lady's horses."

"What lady's horses?"

Georget reflected for a moment, and then murmured, hanging his head : "I cannot tell now."

Maxime, greatly disappointed, approached the subject by a new route. "You know this Ladislas, too, I suppose?" he inquired.

"Not much," Georget replied ; "I have seen him two or three times, and that was enough, for he's a horrid creature."

"What did you have to do with him," asked Maxime, "since you went to see him?"

The lad reflected an instant, and then said : "It is no use questioning me. Everything has gone from me again."

Maxime saw that it was useless to insist. Georget was evidently perfectly sincere. He had lucid intervals, but his mind soon became obscured, and there seemed to be little prospect of obtaining any accurate information from him. "Do you know the Countess Yalta?" Maxime asked suddenly, as they proceeded in the direction of the Avenue de Villiers.

"I should say that I did," exclaimed the lad ; "she is a great friend of grandmamma's."

"Then you have been to her house, haven't you?"

"Oh, very often. She has a beautiful house ; there are more pictures in it than in the museums, and the servants look like ministers ; but she isn't at all proud for all that. Every time I go to see her she treats me to fish roe, served on bread and butter, and a queer dish it is."

This description of *caviare* made the banker's nephew smile, without diverting him from the pursuit of his investigation. "What does she talk about when you see her?" he inquired.

"About all sorts of things. She asks if my grandmother is well, how I like it at Monsieur Dorgères', and inquires about Mademoiselle Alice and Monsieur de Carnoël. The last time I was there, I recollect that she was ill in bed and that she asked me for news of Monsieur Robert."

"And did you give her any?"

"Yes ; that is, I don't know. It seems to me that I couldn't, because I hadn't seen him for three or four days."

"Would you like to see him again?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then let us go to my uncle's. Vignory can perhaps tell us where he is ; I don't know."

Maxime glanced at the child out of the corner of his eye, and saw that the lad was making a terrible effort to collect his fugitive ideas. The name of Carnoël had evidently aroused some confused memories which he

was trying to arrange in proper order. A prolonged silence followed, during which Georget allowed himself to be conducted to the Rue de Suresnes; and it was not until after he had crossed the banker's threshold that he found his tongue again. "Look, there's my double!" he exclaimed, on perceiving a page attired exactly like himself. "He's wearing my vest, my buttons, and my cap. That does not prevent him from looking like an idiot, though."

Maxime did not think it advisable to inform Georget that the lad in question was his successor, but still holding the boy by the hand he opened the office-door and pushed him inside. "You here!" exclaimed Vignory, surprised to see this lad with Maxime, who only that morning had accused him of being the perpetrator, or at least the accomplice, of a robbery. "Are you well again? But no; you only use one arm yet; how is the other?"

"The other is hanging from my neck. I only fly with one wing now; but that makes no difference, Monsieur Vignory, if you need me."

"Haven't you heard that the master has filled your place?"

"With that big canary bird I just met at the door?" exclaimed Georget. "I suspected it, when I saw his jacket. Well, Monsieur Dorgères certainly hasn't gained by the change." He turned while speaking, and began to examine the door of the open safe. "Look!" he exclaimed suddenly; "you have changed the word—the word that opens the safe. It was Mademoiselle Alice's name before; and now——"

"How do you know that?"

"I know, because I read it."

"When?"

"I don't remember. Before that word there was another one."

The cashier and Maxime exchanged a meaning glance.

"And does the trap still work?" inquired Georget.

"The trap?" repeated Vignory.

"Yes; the trap to catch the thieves. Ah! there it is."

Maxime, as much agitated as his friend, took the child by the arm and led him into the adjoining closet, which the new partner had fitted up for his private use. Vignory understood, and followed them.

"You have arranged this little hole very nicely," remarked the lad quietly. "It was so full of old trash before, that the gov'nor's New-foundland could not have found room to lie down in it."

"But you could get in, couldn't you?" asked Maxime.

"I'm not as big as the dog."

"Then you did get in here sometimes?"

"I think so; but I'm not very sure, because, you see, my memory has gone."

"Try to recollect."

"I *am* trying; but I can't remember."

Maxime beckoned to Vignory, and they withdrew to the end of the long, narrow closet, leaving the boy seated on a chair near the door. "What do you think of this?" whispered the banker's nephew. "Don't you think I was right in suspecting that this lad was mixed up in the affair? It's evident that he hid here to learn the working of the trap, and he has just told us that he knew the word."

"I agree with you," replied Vignory. "This young rascal must have furnished the thieves with the necessary information. Still, it doesn't follow from this that Monsieur de Carnoël is innocent," he added, rather timidly.

"You presume, then, that he acted in concert with Georget. That isn't impossible; the boy is devoted to him."

"And does he know where Robert is?"

"He did know, very probably; but he has forgotten, just as he has forgotten everything else."

"Then you believe that this loss of memory is genuine, not pretended?"

"If it were feigned, he wouldn't have made so many imprudent admissions. He would not have said that 'Alice' was the word that opened the safe. There was nothing to oblige him to commit himself like that. Besides, if you wish to convince yourself that he is acting in good faith, you have only to look at him. He is making a soldier cap out of that old envelope he has just picked up, and the work absorbs him entirely. I am sure he hasn't the slightest idea of what we have said to him. Eh, Georget! what are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," replied the boy. "I'm only waiting for Monsieur Vignory to send me on an errand."

"Monsieur Vignory has no commissions for you to-day."

"So much the worse. I would rather run about the streets than hang about the waiting-room, though sometimes there's some fun there, watching the odd people who come in."

"I would wager anything that you make faces at them."

"Never, Monsieur Maxime. It must have been Malicorne who told you that."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because he doesn't like me. He's very foolish, for I could have had him sent away long ago if I had chosen to do so."

"You?"

"Yes; I had only to say that he was never at his post, and that one could get into the bank as easily as if it were a mill, in the evening."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I have done it myself."

"Nonsense; you always ran away as soon as the clock struck six."

"That's true. There are some boys who wait for me every evening at the Madeleine; and yet I'm sure I have remained here once at least, when there was no one here, and it seems to me that I was very much afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of everything. At night the only light in the office is what shines in from the street lamp on the other side of the way; and the big safe looks like a huge black giant, and then the mice run about under your feet; it is enough to make your flesh creep."

"You were locked in while you were asleep, probably."

"Perhaps so."

"Didn't you call for some one to come and let you out?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't you see any one?"

"No; no one."

"How did you get out?"

"I don't know."

Maxime was fairly trembling with impatience. He thought the secret was in his grasp; but each time that exasperating "I don't know" was repeated like a refrain, putting an end to all progress, and there was nothing to do but to begin over again. Vignory frowned and shrugged his shoulders. "Do you know Colonel Borisoff?" asked Maxime, brusquely.

"Colonel Borisoff? Of course I do. I've seen him at least three times, and I was here when he came to get a box he had left with the gov'nor. I don't like him, for he's a Russian, and grandmamma doesn't like them either."

"What harm have they ever done her?"

"Oh, things I've forgotten; and then I don't like this horrid Cossack's voice. He sings when he talks. One would think he was a hurdy-gurdy. I remember what sport I had mocking him when he rapped on the door. He saw me, and was beginning to growl at me, when Monsieur Vignory came in."

"It would have been an excellent thing if Colonel Borisoff had given you a lesson," said the cashier. "Monsieur Dorgères does not pay you to make fun of his clients and to listen at doors."

Maxime hastily interposed, fearing that Vignory's ill humour would spoil everything by frightening the lad. "Bah!" he exclaimed, "every one has a right to a little fun, and, like you, I don't care much about Colonel Borisoff. Did he get his box?"

"No," replied Georget, without the slightest hesitation; "he couldn't get it as it wasn't here."

"Had some one taken it, then?"

"Of course."

"Who?"

"Wait, while I think. It was—my head is becoming confused again—I had the name just now, and it has escaped me."

"Ladislas," said Maxime, at a venture.

"Yes, that's it," exclaimed Georget, clapping his hands.

"The man in the Rue Jouffroy?"

"The very same. The old brute; he's as hateful as Borisoff."

"And the lady, whose horses Ladislas trains, was she there, too?"

Georget began to reflect, but at last he slowly replied, "I didn't see the lady. Ladislas was alone."

"Think! It was perhaps the same lady I escorted home from the rink."

"The rink!" repeated the boy, who was evidently making strenuous efforts to regain a lost idea.

"Yes, you know that I met a lady there whom I escorted home, and that you followed us."

"Don't tell me that, Monsieur Maxime. It confuses me."

"Then let us return to Ladislas. He must have been Colonel Borisoff's enemy since he stole his box."

"Borisoff is a brigand."

"True, but how did he injure Ladislas?"

Georget pressed his hands upon his forehead, but said never a word. Maxime and Vignory waited anxiously for a decisive response. "I cannot tell," the lad at last murmured, despairingly. "It has all gone again now. I cannot remember anything more."

Maxime was desperate. He saw that his friend thought the scene ridiculous, and that he still doubted the lad's sincerity. However, it was impossible for Vignory to be an impartial judge in this affair. He was thinking of his absent rival who was still so formidable, and cursing the mania for investigation which seemed to have seized hold of Maxime Dorgères. Drawing his friend aside, he whispered: "What do you hope to discover? it is evident that this young scamp knows the thieves, and that he helped them. But what does that matter to us? We are not

bound to work for Colonel Borisoff, who has long since become reconciled to the loss of his casket. For my part, I have had enough of this. Take the boy back where he came from, and let us talk no more about him."

"Very well, I am going," replied Maxime, a little piqued. "Come, Georget," he added, pushing the child towards the door. Vignory did not attempt to detain them, and the friends parted without another word.

Maxime did not share the opinion of his uncle's partner by any means; and the lad's reticence on some subjects only served to stimulate him in his efforts to discover the truth. All the recent revelations were favourable to M. de Carnoël; that was undeniable. The thief was evidently the man of the Rue Jouffroy, who had fled to his native land after regaining possession of the bracelet. Why should he imagine that Robert de Carnoël had any acquaintance with the beauty of the skating-rink? These people must be the enemies of Borisoff, who was certainly not connected in any way with Robert.

At the gateway Maxime and Georget chanced to meet Mademoiselle Dorgères, followed by the inevitable Madame Martineau. Maxime had not seen Alice for several days, and he would have been glad not to have met her on this occasion, for the situation, as regarded herself, had become extremely delicate, although she did not suspect it. She had grown rather paler, but she was still very lovely, and her sweet face brightened when she perceived Maxime and Georget. She approached them, and after shaking hands with her cousin and kissing the boy, who had uttered a joyful cry on perceiving her, she inquired after his health, saying that she found him greatly changed.

"Oh! he is doing very well," replied Maxime, hastily, to prevent Georget from making any imprudent remark. "I called at his grandmother's for him, and am giving him a little outing by way of diversion. Am I not a good boy?"

"It is certainly very commendable in you. I, too, should have gone to see him if my father had not forbidden it."

"May I ask where you are going to now?"

"It is a secret," replied Alice, "but I can take you into my confidence. I am going to sit for my portrait. It is to be a surprise for my father. The artist lives at the corner of the Rue de Lisbonne and the Rue de Courcelles. If you are going to take Georget back to his grandmother's, it is not much out of your way. Will you accompany us?"

"Nothing would please me better, if Madame Martineau does not object."

"You are trying to make me out a Spanish duenna, Monsieur Maxime," said the companion, smiling; "but I warn you that you won't succeed. Alice knows me too well. By way of penance, you shall accompany us, and tell us about a lady who is dying to know my pupil—the Countess Yalta."

"The Countess Yalta!" repeated Maxime, who had scarcely expected to hear Madame Martineau pronounce this name.

"Yes, sir; this noble lady called at your uncle's about an hour ago, and expressed a desire to see your cousin here. Monsieur Dorgères did his best to decline the honour. He does not consider a foreign lady who drives a four-in-hand a very suitable associate for a young girl. But the countess insisted so strenuously that he was compelled to get out of the difficulty by an evasive reply, so she went away saying she would soon

return. We don't understand the cause of this sudden infatuation for Alice, but, as you know her, perhaps you may be able to solve the enigma."

"Did she speak of me to my uncle?"

"She had a great deal to say about you. The excuse for her visit was Georget; but she soon ceased to talk about him, and launched out into praises of you, declaring that you were aware of her resolve to become acquainted with Alice, and that you approved of it. Your uncle is inclined to think she is crazy."

Maxime was not at all of this opinion, but he was astonished that the countess, whom he had left reclining on a couch, should have scarcely waited for his departure to drive out, in spite of Dr. Villagos' prohibition. The young fellow's resolution was instantly formed. "My dear Madame Martineau, and you, Alice," he said, "will, I am sure, excuse me if I speak plainly. It is my duty to tell you all that I know, whatever it may cost me. You are aware that Jules Vignory is my best friend, and you cannot possibly suspect me of any desire to injure him; but honesty compels me to tell you that the countess is undertaking to establish Monsieur de Carnoël's innocence."

Alice turned very pale and made no reply, but Madame Martineau became indignant, and declared that it sounded very strange to hear Maxime plead the cause of a man he had been one of the first to accuse.

"I don't defend him; it is the countess who does that. I am only trying to discover the truth, that's all; and I thought it my duty to inform you of what is going on. The countess obtained her information from Georget, who must have been more or less indirectly connected with the affair, and could, I am satisfied, name the real culprit, had he not lost his memory through a terrible, mysterious accident. The countess is convinced that Monsieur de Carnoël is in Paris; that he is innocent; and that if he has not shown himself for a month it is only because he has fallen into the hands of persons who are interested in preventing his re-appearance."

"That's absurd!" exclaimed the governess.

"It does not appear very probable, I confess. The countess also believes that Georget knows where Monsieur de Carnoël is, and she begged me to take the lad out for a walk about the city. She hopes that his memory will return to him. Madmen have been known to become sane for an instant at sight of objects that reminded them of the past. Well, I could not refuse the countess the favour she asked of me, and I don't regret it, for Georget has certainly disclosed some remarkable things, and I am satisfied that if he recovers his intellectual powers he can clear up the whole mystery."

"And he does not think Monsieur de Carnoël guilty?" asked Alice, in an agitated voice.

"He declared to Madame Yalta that Monsieur de Carnoël was not implicated in the slightest degree; and this is the cause of Madame Yalta's desire to see you. You asked me the intentions of the countess; I thought it was not proper for me to conceal them; but I have nothing more to say. You know the situation now, and can decide what course to pursue. I leave it for you to say whether you will see her or refuse to associate with her. For myself, I shall finish what I have begun, and I shall not lose sight of Georget until I have extorted the information I desire. The truth must be discovered; we are all interested in knowing

it. I have warned Vignory, and he is not offended at my decision; that is all I care about."

"If your uncle were aware of your projects, sir," said Madame Martineau, rather crossly, "he would not thank you for disturbing his peace of mind by these imprudent measures."

"I shall be very sorry to displease him, madame; but my mind is made up. Alice will not see the countess, but I shall continue to see her. Perhaps we are both right; but it is late, and I promised Madame Piriac to bring her grandson home before dark, so allow me to take leave of you and quicken my pace a little." And after bowing to the governess and shaking hands with his cousin, Maxime hastened on to rejoin Georget, who was a short distance in advance of them. "Well, my lad, have you enjoyed your walk?" he asked.

"Oh, yes; it is so nice to be out in the open air again. In our house, too, it is so dark that grandmother is obliged to light a lamp at three o'clock in the afternoon."

"To-morrow I will call and take you out again. Perhaps we will go to see the countess."

"What countess?"

"The one who has such a handsome house in the Avenue de Friedland."

"Oh, yes, Nadeje."

"Nadeje? Do you mean Madame Yalta?"

"Grandmother always call her Nadeje. Ask her."

Here was a fresh surprise. Maxime did not know the countess's Christian name, never having thought of asking M. Villagos what it was; and he little expected to hear it uttered by a street urchin, still less to be informed that Madame Piriac was on such familiar terms with the countess. They were now passing down the Rue de Vigny. "Look!" cried the boy suddenly; "this is a street where I had plenty of fun. Do you see that sidewalk before that big house? It looks as if it were made expressly to play marbles on. I played there for a couple of hours on the day I broke my arm."

"Do you really recognise the place?"

"Perfectly. It seems to me it was only yesterday. I failed to start for the office in time, so I thought to myself it would be just as well not to go at all that day: they would think that I was ill."

"But you didn't stay here all day?"

"No; I went out to the fortifications; but I'm sure I returned here, though I cannot tell why."

"Try to recollect."

"Wait until I look at the house a little."

"It is certainly a splendid one. What a massive gateway and large courtyard! There must be a garden at the back of it."

"A garden," repeated Georget; "a garden surrounded by walls?"

"Of course. If you like we can walk round the property, as it stands alone. Do you know the name of its owner?"

"No; and still it seems to me I have been inside."

"I will inquire," thought Maxime, whose curiosity was now thoroughly aroused. "The house seems to be occupied, though it is quite new. Why did you go there," he added; "to carry a letter from the office, perhaps?"

"No, no; I'm sure it wasn't for that. I had not set foot in the Rue de Suresnes that day."

Maxime led Georget to the end of the street. "This is the Boulevard de Courcelles, where you were picked up," he remarked.

As soon as they passed the corner the lad's face brightened, his eyes sparkled, and he exclaimed: "Here it is! I know the place; I will show it you." After proceeding some twenty paces further, he paused. "Do you see that wall?" he asked. "Well, I fell from that. See that mortar broken off. As I came down, my head bumped against that large stone here at my feet."

"You were not found here, however; you were lying across the rails of the tramway line in the street."

"Perhaps some one carried me there. I remember nothing after I made the somersault."

"But you must remember why you climbed the wall."

"To see what was on the other side."

"And what did you see?"

"Nothing; ah! it's all night again now."

Maxime made a movement of impatience, but he restrained himself. This was not the moment to frighten Georget. "But how did you get up there?"

"I think it was with a rope—yes, that was it—a rope which had knots in it, and a hook at the end."

"But where did you get this rope?"

"I forget; but I know that I used it. It must have broken while I was getting down."

"But what tempted you to scale this wall? Make one more effort to remember. You must have had some object?"

"Of course; but I've forgotten what it was."

"Think a moment; take your time, and don't be frightened if I urge you a little. I'm not Vignory, and I've no orders to give; I'm your friend, as Monsieur de Carnoël was."

Aladdin was undoubtedly greatly astonished to see the spirit of the wonderful lamp suddenly appear before him; and Maxime Dorgères was not less so to hear Georget exclaim: "Monsieur de Carnoël! it was he! I was looking for him when I climbed up there!"

"You knew, then, that he was in this house?" inquired Maxime, eagerly.

"I knew it. I saw him go in—it all comes back to me now. But I must tell you while I can. Let me speak without interrupting me. Where was I? Can I have forgotten already? No; I know. I was playing marbles in the Rue de Vigny that morning, and I saw M. de Carnoël drive up in a splendid carriage; there was a gentleman with him—a gentleman with gold spectacles, and on the box, beside the coachman, a man dressed in office livery."

"It was in this same equipage that I saw him," thought Maxime, who took good care not to utter a word, for fear of checking Georget's reminiscences.

"The gate was opened," continued the lad, "and it closed immediately after the carriage entered the courtyard. All this seemed very strange to me, for I thought that Monsieur de Carnoël had left Paris; and besides, he looked so sad, that I somehow imagined he was being carried off by force, so I got the other boys off to a place where they play, but in ten minutes I was back again and rang the bell, and asked the porter, squarely: 'Is my master here?' 'Who's your master?' said he. 'The

Marquis Robert de Carnoël,' I answered. I thought he was going to eat me up. He shouted: 'Get out, you scoundrel!' and shut the door in my face. I couldn't force it open, but I concealed myself behind a pile of stones in the street, and remained there. The carriage came out again in about an hour's time, but Monsieur de Carnoël was not in it. I said to myself: 'They have shut him up in there to do him some harm, but I'll set him at liberty.' Pretty soon a boy I knew passed by; his father keeps a gymnasium in the Avenue de Wagram. I gave him ten sous to go and get me a strong rope with a hook at the end. He brought it, and then I sent him away. By eleven o'clock the boulevard was deserted, so I came to the place where we are now standing, threw up the hook, which was very sharp, climbed up the rope, and after placing myself astride on the wall, I looked and saw——"

"Monsieur de Carnoël?"

"Yes, he was standing at a large window, holding a candle, so I could see him very distinctly. I recognised him perfectly, and I think he recognised me, for he made signs to me——"

"And then?" inquired Maxime, eagerly.

"Then I fell, and I can't recollect anything further. My head's becoming confused again, and I want to go home to grandmother."

"Come, my lad," said Maxime, who now knew enough to act upon.

XII.

WHILE Maxime was leading Georget about the streets of Paris, M. Borisoff was reclining on a divan, and holding a conference with his major-domo, whom he had just summoned. "What is the Frenchman doing now?" the colonel inquired, as he laid aside his nargileh.

"He is sleeping, your Excellency."

"Or pretends to be sleeping. What does he say this morning?"

"Nothing, your Excellency. For several days he has not even condescended to answer, whenever I inquire concerning his health."

"Is it good?"

"Excellent; his confinement has made scarcely any difference in his appearance. That man is sustained by an iron will."

"Say that he is extremely obstinate, and that after reflecting on the situation he has determined not to speak, whatever his silence may cost him. Of two evils he has chosen the least."

"It seems to me if you send him to Siberia, as you have threatened, his lot will be far from enviable. I don't see how any worse fate could befall him."

"Vacillate, you lack common sense."

"Excuse me, your Excellency, but if he could avoid the journey by disclosing the names of his accomplices it would be wise for him to do so. He is intelligent enough to understand that it is his only means of escape."

"Yes; but he also knows that the people he betrayed would never forgive him. He knows that they ferret out everything, and show no mercy to traitors: He doesn't care to have his nose and ears cut off, he prefers the journey to Siberia."

"Perhaps he also hopes that you won't carry your threat into execution."

"Yes, these Frenchmen always imagine that it is impossible to treat

them as a person treats ordinary mortals, and that no one would dare to do in Paris what he might do in St. Petersburg or Moscow. But I shall take it upon myself to undeceive him. You will prepare the rolling prison that is used in these cases, and when he sees it ready and waiting he may, perhaps, decide to speak."

"The question is whether he really has anything to confess," Vacili suggested, timidly.

"Do you doubt it?"

"I must not presume to differ with your Excellency; but, if you will permit me to speak frankly, and will condescend to listen to my reasons——"

"State them."

"First, allow me to ask if it seems natural to you that a person connected with the Nihilists should have fallen so easily into the trap I set for this young man? Nor do the scoundrels of that society contemplate embarking for America."

"I have never maintained that he was a regular member of the order. First, he isn't a Russian, and he has no personal interest in their revolutionary schemes. I consider him merely a simpleton who had been seduced by one of their infernal women."

"Your Excellency forgets that he was in love with the daughter of Monsieur Dorgères, and that he expected to marry her."

"So he only consented to steal my papers on the very day the banker dismissed him, and informed him that he would never accept him as a son-in-law. Not till then did he listen to the voice of his former mistress, and burn his ships behind him. She promised him her help in foreign lands, so he contented himself with taking fifty thousand francs from the safe to pay his travelling expenses."

"Unless this sum was really sent to him, as he pretends, and as the letter on his person seems to indicate."

"Bah! the letter wasn't signed, and he may have written it himself. This story about an old debtor of his father's is an extremely improbable one."

"However that may be, this accomplice cannot be found."

"Simply because the search has been miserably conducted. The information I have received from the chief of the Third Section has been extremely scanty. There are women whom no one has thought of, but who plan all these conspiracies. They are wonderfully well posted, and they probably knew that my casket contained full instructions for my mission, and my entire correspondence with the general and the minister."

"But what is most curious is that one of these women should have been aware that your Excellency had deposited this casket with your banker."

"She was informed by the secretary, that is evident."

"However, as your Excellency knows, I have carefully inquired into the life formerly led by this young man, and I am almost certain that he was not on visiting terms with a single Russian. I have even inquired into any possible relations he might have with the Countess Yalta, who is also a depositor in Monsieur Dorgères' bank, and I am convinced that he has never even seen her."

"Oh, the countess has nothing to do with the Nihilists. On my arrival in Paris, I pointed her out to the Department, and she has been very closely watched; but I am satisfied now. She is the daughter of a Cir-

cassian prince, who sold his possessions to the Emperor for several million roubles. The daughter married some other lord, who soon left her a widow. She left Russia when a mere child, and has never thought of anything but amusement. It is certain that she takes no interest in politics. So let us return to the Frenchman. I must come to a decision, and at once. The respite of a month that I granted him expires to-morrow. Does he never inquire for me?"

"Never; he does not speak a dozen words a day. He drinks, eats, and reads, all in moderation, and the rest of the time he sleeps."

"I think I did wrong in suspending my visits. At first, when I talked to him about Mademoiselle Dorgères' approaching marriage to the cashier, he flew into a furious passion, which he hardly succeeded in restraining. I must make one more attempt. I saw the banker yesterday, and he told me that the date of his daughter's marriage was decided upon. I will see what the prisoner will say when he receives this intelligence, which will put an end to his last hopes. What do you think of my plan, Vacili?"

"May I remind you, sir, of a principle you yourself have just laid down—that the young man will be silent to the end from a fear of the vengeance of the Nihilists. I have more than once regretted that he allowed himself to be captured; for if he had remained free, he would have betrayed his secrets by some imprudent step."

"Not at all; for he was making arrangements to leave Paris."

"He thought of doing so, but his love for Mademoiselle Dorgères would have detained him. Had he not written to her appointing a meeting the very day I brought him here?"

"Yes," muttered the colonel, "we were perhaps wrong to be so hasty, but unfortunately it is too late to repair that error. Carnoël is now forewarned; he wouldn't be so foolish as to visit his accomplices, or rather, his accomplice, for I am sure it was a woman."

"Your Excellency," suggested Vacili, with some trepidation, "there is still time to resort to a means which you have overlooked. I think it would be best to set Monsieur de Carnoël at liberty."

"Release the Frenchman! You are mad, Vacili."

"Pardon me, your Excellency; I have considered the situation carefully, and I see no other means of discovering if Monsieur de Carnoël really has accomplices. I don't think he would make a complaint to the authorities, for he would then be obliged to enter into explanations which he must prefer to avoid. Besides, you might ask him to promise you to be silent. If he gives you his word of honour, he will keep it."

"You forget that some one saw the Frenchman enter this house."

"Your Excellency refers to the boy who called to inquire for him the day I brought him here. I beg your Excellency to recollect how the whole thing happened. A lad in Monsieur Dorgères' employ chanced to be playing on the sidewalk when the carriage stopped at the gate, and he recognised Monsieur de Carnoël, whom he had often seen, and he had the audacity to apply to the porter, who drove him away. This seems to indicate that the child suspected something; and I should have watched him closely, had I not learned the following morning that he was no longer to be feared. He had been picked up, half dead, upon the boulevard. I suspect he tried to scale the garden wall, and fell. However, this much is certain, he remains an idiot, and will never be able to tell what happened to him."

"I am not so sure of that. He may recover, and, besides, it is very

strange a page should risk his neck to find out what had become of his employer's secretary. The lad may have had a hand in the robbery himself. You ought to have made an investigation."

"The investigation has been made, your Excellency; and I have discovered that it happened only by the merest chance, or from pure curiosity. The lad is the grandson of a poor woman who acts as a concierge. He was very much attached to Monsieur de Carnoël, who was very kind to him, and he knew that Monsieur de Carnoël had disappeared rather mysteriously. When he saw him drive into your courtyard he was naturally very much astonished; but, fortunately, he fractured his skull before he had time to gossip. The proof of this is that no one has been here to inquire for Monsieur de Carnoël, or to try to rescue him."

"That is true, he is forgotten; and if he reappeared no one would ever think of inquiring what he had been doing since he left the banker's house. I will consider your proposal, and perhaps I will act upon it."

Just then the door opened, and a footman entered with a visiting card upon a silver waiter.

"Who is it?" asked the colonel, impatiently. "I told you I would see no one."

"The gentleman insisted, saying he called on very important business."

M. Borisoff took the card, and seemed greatly surprised on reading the visitor's name. "Show him into the drawing-room," he said to the footman, and then turning to his major-domo he exclaimed: "Do you know who wishes to see me? It is the nephew of Dorgères, the banker. I barely know him. What can he have to say to me?"

"Perhaps he was sent by his uncle."

"Very probably; but what for. It is singular that he should have appeared just as we were talking of the secretary. Go and tell the head groom to get my travelling carriage ready. It is not at all certain that I shall decide to release our prisoner."

M. Borisoff, after dismissing his major-domo, rose from the divan, and passed into the adjoining room, where he found Maxime Dorgères standing near a window, with a grave face which showed that his errand was of a momentous nature. It was not the first time they had seen each other, but the present meeting would have been extremely cold had it not been for the colonel. "Before inquiring what has brought you, sir," he began very affably, "allow me to express my pleasure at seeing you. Monsieur Dorgères has often spoken of you, and I have long regretted that I had not the honour of a more intimate acquaintance with you."

"I am greatly obliged to you," replied Maxime coldly; "but when you learn the object of my visit——"

"Tell me something about Monsieur Dorgères. It has been several days since I saw him, and——"

"I do not come from him or on his behalf, and I——"

"How is his charming daughter? Is it true that the day of her marriage has been appointed?"

"I do not know, sir. I wish to speak to you on quite a different subject."

This was said so curtly, and with so much gravity that the colonel's manner and language suddenly changed. "Then pray explain at once, sir," he said haughtily, "I thought you intended to pay me a friendly visit, but it seems that I was mistaken. Still, I cannot imagine what you have to say to me."

"I wish to know what has become of Monsieur de Carnoël?" replied Maxime, looking M. Borisoff full in the face.

The colonel must have been endowed with invincible coolness, for he received this unexpected question with unruffled composure. "Excuse me, but I do not very clearly understand your question. You wish to know what has become of Monsieur de Carnoël, who was, I believe, the secretary of Monsieur Dorgères, my banker. Why do you apply to me for this information? I saw him, on one occasion, I believe, in your uncle's office, but I had no conversation with him."

"Possibly, but afterwards you were much interested in him."

"Will you explain yourself more clearly?"

"Very willingly. It is unnecessary to tell you that Monsieur de Carnoël left my uncle's house the night the safe was robbed. A casket was taken which belonged to you, and Monsieur de Carnoël was accused of having taken it."

"That is true; only it was decided that the unfortunate affair should be kept a secret. I am surprised that Monsieur Dorgères should have related it to you."

"It does not matter how I obtained the knowledge. I do know it, and I also know that you took it upon yourself to discover Monsieur de Carnoël."

"Took it upon myself is scarcely the proper expression. I am not in the habit of interfering with the affairs of others. I persuaded your uncle to lodge no complaint, for I did not wish my name to be mixed up in criminal affairs. Monsieur Dorgères consented, but desired me to make use of my diplomatic connections in discovering what had become of the thief. I was certainly very anxious to regain possession of the family papers which my casket contained, and I hoped to compel him to return them to me if he was captured. Unfortunately, the search was not successful. We learned that Monsieur de Carnoël went to Brittany, and subsequently returned to Paris; but afterwards all trace of him was lost. It is probable that he has left France; but you must be aware of all this, since you are so well informed; and I am greatly surprised that you should apply to me for information on the subject. It is scarcely probable that it was your uncle who advised you to do so."

"No, sir. I have consulted no one; but I have acted with a thorough knowledge of the circumstances, and I ask you once more: What has become of Monsieur de Carnoël?"

"The question is so strange that I might very reasonably be offended by it; but I shall content myself by saying that I have already answered it. I have every reason to believe that Monsieur de Carnoël is in some foreign country."

"Monsieur de Carnoël is in Paris."

"How do you know?"

"I saw him a month ago."

"Very possibly you did see him a month ago, but in a month he has had time to cross the frontier, and possibly the seas."

"I saw him not far from here, in a carriage, going towards the Parc Monceau."

"It is very unfortunate that you did not follow it," said the colonel, ironically. "In that case we should have known where Monsieur de Carnoël was going."

"I did not follow it, but some one saw it again afterwards, and it

entered the Rue de Vigny and paused before the gateway of your residence ; the gate was opened, and the carriage drove in."

"What! Entered my grounds? Ah, this is altogether too much, and I am astonished that you should have placed the least faith in such an absurd invention."

"It is not an invention. The person who saw it was not deceived."

"So," replied the colonel, pretending to suppress a strong desire to laugh, "you believe that this secretary came to pay me a visit after he was dismissed and accused of theft. He probably came for the purpose of returning me my casket!"

"I do not think he came here voluntarily."

"Then I must have kidnapped him in the heart of Paris, and in broad daylight. Really you do me great honour by deeming me capable of such an achievement. And what could be my object in such an autocratic proceeding?"

"I do not know, sir ; but I *do* know that Monsieur de Carnoël was brought to your house, and that he must be here still ; or if he is no longer here, you know where he is, for you cannot deny that he was brought here."

"But, on the contrary, I do deny it ; I deny it absolutely."

"You deny it, but I assert it ; and I wish to know what you have done with Monsieur de Carnoël."

The colonel made no reply for several moments, and when he spoke again, it was in a graver and deeply injured tone. "Sir," he said, slowly, "my age and my position would justify me in abruptly terminating an interview of this kind ; but my relations with Monsieur Dorgères are of such a friendly nature that I hesitate to avail myself of this incontestible right. Consequently, I shall content myself with remarking that your errand is an extremely singular one. You certainly cannot hope that I am going to obey you, and I suppose you don't intend to constrain me to reply."

"No ; I shall resort to other measures to attain my object, which is the discovery of Monsieur de Carnoël. If necessary, I shall apply to the commissary of police."

"This is unbearable!" exclaimed M. Borisoff, haughtily. "I have listened patiently to your absurd questions, but I will not tolerate threats, and I beg that you will leave the house."

"Is that your final decision?" asked Maxime, crimson with anger.

"Yes ; and I ought to have arrived at it sooner."

"Very well ; I know what to do. You will not tolerate threats, you say, nor will I tolerate offensive language. You have called my questions absurd ; to-morrow I will send you my seconds."

"I am ready to receive them," replied the colonel, turning his back on Maxime, who went away furious.

The calmness that M. Borisoff had succeed in maintaining during this interview was only on the surface, and when the major-domo met his master again he saw that a furious storm was about to burst forth. "Do you know what that fool came to say to me?" cried Borisoff. "He called to demand the surrender of Monsieur de Carnoël ; he declares that Monsieur de Carnoël is here, that he was seen to enter my grounds in a carriage a month ago. He is well informed, you see."

"Maybe he has received the information through the boy ; but no, that is impossible, for the lad has lost his memory."

"It makes very little difference how he obtained the information; but he has it, and he is determined to push things to extremes. He has challenged me, and threatened me with the commissary of police. I can afford to laugh at his challenge and his commissary; still, we must consider the matter. In the first place, the release of Carnoël is now impossible. Nor can I keep him here any longer with safety. These Frenchmen are such fools that some commissary of police might be found who would issue a search warrant. I don't wish to incur any risk of being summoned before a law court, so Monsieur de Carnoël will depart to-morrow evening. You will telegraph to our agents, so that relays may be in readiness as far as Strasburg, and now I will make a last effort to induce the prisoner to capitulate. Go and announce me."

Vacili bowed, and withdrew. His master was very wrathful, for he began to stalk up and down the room, gesticulating, and even shaking his fist at his invisible enemies. "Cursed be the day when I consented to come to Paris to watch the conspiracies conducted by three or four disreputable women," he exclaimed. "In Russia, a man at least has some power, and isn't afraid to arrest suspicious characters. But here everybody is against me, and yet, if I don't succeed in my mission, my chief will say I'm a blockhead! This Carnoël shall suffer for the others," he concluded, going towards the library where Robert had been confined for a month.

Robert was not expecting a visit from his jailer; indeed, he had ceased to expect or to hope. The first few days of his captivity had been spent in frightful anguish, for the colonel took delight in torturing him with accounts of the progress that Vignory was making in winning Alice's affection. Still the prisoner listened stoically, and did not falter in his determination to resist the colonel to the last. He counted upon Georget's assistance. But the apparition of the first night was not repeated on the following one; and a week passed, then two, and then three, without Georget giving any sign of life. Soon, too, the colonel ceased to come, leaving Robert to the care and custody of his subordinates; and the young fellow, coming gradually to the conclusion that not a single chance of salvation remained, accepted his fate with that grim resignation which is born of dire extremities. He relapsed into a moody silence, and no longer strove to think. Strange as it may appear, he had not thought that some accident might have happened to Georget to prevent his return.

In Robert's state of mind, the announcement of the colonel's visit had little effect upon him. "It is a long time since I saw you," remarked M. Borisoff. "I wished to give you time to consider the proposition which I made to you, and which still holds good. But the situation cannot be prolonged further. I granted you a month's respite, and this month expires to-morrow. Remember, you are free the instant you consent to name your accomplice, and that I will engage to reinstate you in Monsieur Dorgères' esteem."

"It is a very tempting offer, but I repeat that I am innocent, and that consequently I have no accomplice. I feel no desire to purchase my freedom at the cost of a false confession."

"You think that Mademoiselle Dorgères is irrevocably lost to you. You think so, because I have not spoken of her for some time. But I will put you in possession of the facts of the case, and explain how matters really stand."

"Spare yourself the trouble; you will extort nothing from me, whatever you may tell me."

"No matter. It is only right that you should know everything. I mentioned some time ago M. Dorgères' desire to marry his daughter to his partner. The marriage-day is appointed, and your friend Vignory has been accepted by Mademoiselle Alice. It is your prolonged absence that has brought about this result. If you had heeded my advice, you might have reappeared and have brought your friend's matrimonial campaign to naught. Now it will be more difficult, for early in February Mademoiselle Dorgères is to become Madame Vignory."

"What is the use, then, of wearying me with your importunities? Were I to be freed to-morrow, this marriage would be none the less certain. I should make no attempt to prevent it."

"Then you would do very wrong. There is still time to break it off. Mademoiselle Dorgères has consented against her will. She grew weary of the struggle when, after long days of waiting, she saw that you did not appear to silence your traducers. Your silence could still easily be explained. You might say that you had gone off ignorant of the charge against you, and in despair on account of Monsieur Dorgères' refusal to listen to your suit. You could add that you had just heard these charges against you, and had returned to refute them. You might have been informed of them by some one who was interested in you—for instance, the page who was in the waiting-room when the theft was discovered, a shrewd lad, whose name was Georges, or Georget, I believe."

On hearing this name Robert could not repress a slight start, which did not escape the colonel's keen eyes. "I mentioned this boy because he interested himself in you," resumed M. Borisoff. "It seems that he saw you the day my steward brought you here, for he called to inquire for you, and my porter had some difficulty in driving him away."

"If he knew I was your prisoner he would not have kept the secret to himself; he would have spoken of it to my friend Vignory, and perhaps even to Monsieur Dorgères. He would have found some one to free me from your clutches. I am certain."

"This is, no doubt likely, but that same day he had a severe fall. He sustained a fracture of the skull, and is, and will always remain, an idiot." This time Robert turned pale. He understood now why Georget had not reappeared. "I tell you this," continued the colonel, "so you may not delude yourself with the hope that you will be succoured by this youth. And this reminds me that I have just made a mistake in advising you to say that he informed you of the accusation against you. You might designate another person—Monsieur Maxime Dorgères, if you like—for he, too, takes a interest in you."

"I scarcely know him," said M. de Carnoël, impatiently. "But why all this useless discussion? I repeat, for the hundredth time, that you will never extort the information you desire, for the simple reason that you ask an impossibility. Listen to me—and when you have heard me through I shall not add another word. I shall not even reply when you ask me a question. You are convinced, I believe, that I have loved, and still love, Mademoiselle Dorgères, and perhaps the offers you have made me are sincere? You are ready, if I accept your conditions, to set me at liberty and to plead my cause with Monsieur Dorgères, when I try to convince him of my innocence? I think you will even go so far as to tell him that you have discovered the real culprit?"

"I have promised all this, and I still promise it," said M. Borisoff, eagerly, convinced that he had conquered at last.

"And you think that, under the circumstances, Monsieur Dorgères, in order to atone for his injustice towards me, would feel it a duty to grant me the hand of his daughter; that Mademoiselle Dorgères, who has not ceased to love me, would be glad to become my wife, and that my rival would remember he had been my friend, and made no effort to dispute the possession of Alice's heart with me? You believe, in short, that it depends entirely upon myself to pass from the depths of misery to the most rapturous happiness?"

"For this dream to become a reality at once, you have only to name your accomplice."

"Can you think I would hesitate if I had one?" asked Robert. "Then you have never loved, since you imagine that a man can sacrifice his love for the sake of keeping faith with fellow-conspirators. If I had stolen your casket to give your secret papers to the Nihilists, I would go and take it from them by force, if necessary, in order to marry the woman I love. I would brave their vengeance and incur the risk of a thousand deaths rather than refuse the happiness with which you tempt me. You can see, therefore, that I know nothing, and that you will gain nothing by tormenting me any further. I have said all I have to say. Now do with me as you please. You can kill me, but you will extort nothing further from me." The colonel frowned and gnawed the ends of his moustache. For the first time since M. de Carnoël had been in his custody, he asked himself if he had not made a mistake in arresting him.

XIII.

ON the morning after Maxime's interview with Colonel Borisoff a girl, and a very pretty one, was walking rapidly up the Avenue de Friedland. She kept close in the shadow of the houses. A thick veil concealed her face, and it was easy to see that she wished to escape recognition. Occasionally she turned, as if to make sure that no one was following her; and she did not seem to be certain of her way, which she apparently did not care to ask of the passers-by. At last, however, she noticed a commissioner, and decided to apply to him. "Can you tell me where I shall find the residence of a lady known as the Countess Yalta?" she inquired, in a voice that was scarcely audible.

"The Countess Yalta?" repeated the man. "Ah, yes, the Russian beauty. Why, here it is, mademoiselle. This is her garden wall; and there is a little side gate about fifty feet from here. But if you are not a particular friend, it won't be of any use to ring, for they won't open it. The main entrance is in the Rue Beaupon, there to the right. You can't mistake it, for it is gilded from top to bottom."

The girl murmured a word of thanks, and followed the instructions given her. She soon found the magnificent gateway of the Hôtel Yalta, and there her doubt and hesitation seemed to increase, for she began to walk slowly up and down in front of the railing, behind which stood the herculean porter who had admitted Maxime the morning before. This imposing personage probably intimidated her, for the nearer she approached him the slower her pace became, and finally she turned away her head as she pulled the brass bell-knob of the lodge. The gorgeously-liveried "Suisse" advanced majestically, and politely inquired what she desired. "I wish to see the Countess Yalta," she faltered.

"The countess is not receiving to-day," replied the colossus, "but if you will state your name and business——"

The visitor started violently, and hung her head; then, after an effort to overcome her timidity, she said in a tolerably firm voice: "I am certain the countess will receive me if you tell her it is Mademoiselle Dorgères who desires to speak with her."

The porter's manner changed instantly, for he was not ignorant of the fact that the coachman had driven the countess to M. Dorgères' residence on the previous day. "Mademoiselle will please excuse me," he said, respectfully; "and if mademoiselle will take the trouble to enter the reception-room, I will warn the countess. She is still ill, and I am ordered to admit no one."

This little speech was punctuated by the ring of a bell which brought a footman out upon the steps. Mademoiselle Dorgères was conducted by this valet to the room where her cousin Maxime had been received every morning for a month by Dr. Villagos. The countess's reply came very promptly, and the same maid who had introduced Maxime on his last visit, came down to receive Alice.

"Mademoiselle," she said, with the greatest deference, "my mistress is very pleased to receive a visit from you, although she is suffering very much just now. She hopes that you will excuse her for receiving you in bed."

Alice faltered a few words of thanks, and followed the maid, who seemed to possess the entire confidence of her mistress. The countess being unable to leave her room, Alice found her reclining in an immense bed, a genuine specimen of the Louis XIV. style, with heavy hangings of Gobelin's tapestry. The chamber was but dimly lighted, for the ceiling was very high, and the windows were of stained glass. Alice's timidity regained the ascendancy, and she scarcely dared to advance. How should she accost this lady, whose pale face she could scarcely distinguish? What should she say to her in explanation of her visit? And what if Maxime had exaggerated? What if Madame Yalta had merely expressed sympathy for M. de Carnoël without having any idea of defending him against his accusers! However, these apprehensions were quickly dispelled, for a silvery voice, which sounded like celestial music in Alice's ears, spoke these words: "I knew you would come. You guessed that I had something to tell you about him."

Alice blushed deeply, and hastened towards the speaker. "I thank you for him and for me," continued the countess. "If you had not come Heaven only knows when I should have seen you. I thought myself cured, but yesterday evening I had another attack which has not yet passed off. Pardon me for not offering you my hand. My physician condemns me to absolute immobility. He has even forbidden me to speak, but I shall disobey that part of his instructions. Sit down here near me and let us talk."

The girl seated herself in a low chair by the bedside and said, in a voice full of emotion: "Madame, I am deeply touched by the welcome you have given me, and I cannot prove my gratitude in any better way than by telling you the whole truth. I came here without the knowledge or consent of my father, who would not have permitted it had I consulted him."

"This does not surprise me in the least. I was satisfied yesterday that Monsieur Dorgères was trying to put me off when I expressed a

desire to be introduced to you, and I like you the better for carrying out your wishes in spite of all obstacles."

"I came because my cousin told me that you were making an effort to prove Monsieur de Carnoël's innocence."

"You love him, do you not?" interrupted the countess.

"I did love him," said Alice, with an effort.

"And yet you are engaged to another!"

"I thought they had proved that Monsieur de Carnoël had committed a dishonourable act, and I yielded to the entreaties of my father, who begged me to marry. I am bound in the eyes of the world, but my heart is my own still."

"They proved, did they not, that the young man had—stolen? Why not speak the word, since it is only a vile calumny? Before proceeding further, will you allow me to ask who informed you of what had taken place, and what they told you?"

"My father told me all, the day the theft was discovered. He informed me that on opening the safe, the cashier discovered the absence of a casket full of valuable papers, belonging to a Russian. Monsieur de Carnoël had fled precipitately the evening before, at about the hour the safe was opened by means of a false key."

"And they rashly concluded he was the guilty party," said the countess. "They did not stop to ask what interest the young man could possibly have in carrying off a casket of promiscuous papers when the safe was filled to overflowing with gold and bank notes, which were not touched."

"A sum of money was also taken," said the young girl, in a voice choked with emotion—"the sum of fifty thousand francs."

"That is not true!" exclaimed the countess.

"Alas, madame, it is only too true. The cashier counted the money in the presence of my father and this Russian, and they found that a roll of notes was missing."

"Impossible," said the countess, with extraordinary confidence. "But has your father not told you of a previous attempt, which failed, and which preceded the second one by only a few days?"

"No; if there had been any previous attempt to break open the safe, I should certainly have heard of it. Monsieur Vignory would have told me, or it would have been spoken of in my hearing."

"Then little Georget, who gave me the information, was mistaken."

"Ah! I saw him yesterday! Maxime brought the poor little fellow to the office, and I met them just as I was going out with my governess."

"Your cousin had Georget with him, you say? May I ask the boy's condition?"

"He seemed to have recovered from his accident, though his arm was still in a sling, but his mental condition was unchanged."

"Then your cousin was unable to elicit any information from him."

"Maxime told us that Georget had made some singular revelations about the theft in Monsieur Vignory's presence. He said that Georget could designate the real culprit, and would do so undoubtedly as soon as his mind was restored."

"That is very probable; but in the meantime I had hoped that he would help your cousin in finding Monsieur de Carnoël."

"You think, then, that Monsieur de Carnoël is in Paris?"

"I am certain of it; and I am going to astonish you by telling you that

he must have fallen into the hands of some powerful enemy the very day you were awaiting him in the Bois de Boulogne."

"Then you knew I was expecting to see him?"

"Yes, by a fortuitous circumstance I learnt that through Monsieur Maxime Dorgères. Subsequently I ascertained that Monsieur de Carnoël had failed to appear at the appointment, and that he was accused of a crime. This information unfortunately came too late to avert what I could have prevented, had I been informed at first. I became dangerously ill, and Georget was nearly killed. Now, however, the hour has come to repair the evil I have unconsciously done. I must find Monsieur de Carnoël, and when I have found him, I, myself, will take him to your father, who will be compelled to receive him when I bring him proofs that he has been unjustly accused, and is entitled to reparation."

"Proofs?" repeated Mademoiselle Dorgères, doubtingly.

"Yes, proofs, for to convince Monsieur Dorgères, the real culprit must denounce himself."

"So Maxime is right; it was Georget!"

"I did not say that; but I swear it is not Monsieur de Carnoël."

This reply was made in such an earnest tone that the girl could doubt no longer. The countess evidently knew the perpetrator of the theft, and was resolved to denounce him to save the innocent man who had been accused. Alice was blessing her, when a strange suspicion suddenly entered her mind. Why did the countess espouse Robert's cause so warmly? Was it likely that she was solely influenced by a love of justice? It was much more probable that she was personally interested in M. de Carnoël, and this interest must be very lively since she offered to sacrifice some one to him. "She loves him, perhaps," thought Alice.

Meanwhile Madame Yalta spoke: "I hope that you do not regret having come here now," she said, "and that we shall henceforth be united in the task of saving Monsieur de Carnoël."

"Have you known him long?" inquired Alice, timidly.

"I do not know him at all. I don't think I have ever seen him."

Alice's face brightened, and she was about to protest her devotion when the waiting-maid entered, and, approaching the bed, exclaimed: "Monsieur Maxime Dorgères begs madame to receive him immediately. He declares that he brings her some very important intelligence."

"Bring him here at once," cried the countess.

The woman hastened away to execute the orders of her mistress. Alice had not dared to speak a word in the servant's presence; but as soon as she was alone with the countess she rose and said in great agitation: "Madame, pray don't compel me to see my cousin. I would not have him find me here for anything in the world."

"Then I am not to let him know that you have been here?"

"I entreat you not to do so."

"Very well," said the countess; "but I see only one way of preventing it. If you follow my maid you will inevitably meet Monsieur Dorgères on the staircase. Will you go in there?" she added, pointing to a door near the head of the bed.

Under any other circumstances Alice would have probably refused the refuge offered to her; but she was desperate now, and she knew that her cousin might enter at any moment. "You will find it a very comfortable prison," resumed the countess, "and I do not think you will be compelled to remain long. Besides, you will be able to leave it at any time,

should you change your mind about the inconvenience of meeting your cousin. Moreover, my interview with him is likely to be a short one."

Alice darted to the door designated to her, and entered a sort of *boudoir* dressing-room, full of luxurious furniture, works of art, and glass cases filled with curiosities. She had scarcely vanished when Maxime was ushered into the bed-room. Seeing that the countess was in bed and evidently suffering, he at once exclaimed: "Good heavens! madame, are you really so ill—you, who were out only yesterday?"

"I did go out, and I was wrong, since I gained nothing from Monsieur Dorgères, and am obliged to atone for my imprudence this morning. The fever came on again, and I have been obliged to return to bed. But what does that matter? Tell me of your excursion with Georget."

"I have a great deal to tell you; so much, indeed, that I am tempted to begin with the most important matter, that is to say, the last one."

"But tell me first, how is Georget? Do you think he will recover his reason?"

"I hope so; he has brief lucid intervals even now; but he is not yet master of himself. Some words escaped him which he would not have spoken under other circumstances."

"What has he said?"

"I took him to the office, and there he made some strange disclosures. He told me that he was acquainted with the words that opened the safe, and with the defensive mechanism which protects it from all attempts to break it open; and pardon me for speaking so plainly—it is my firm conviction that the lad was the accomplice of the thieves."

"That is quite possible," said the countess, with an indifferent air.

"What! are you not grieved to learn that Georget is mixed up in this disgraceful affair?"

"Bah! it was merely a political matter."

"Political! What do you mean?"

"Oh, there can be no doubt about it. What was stolen? A casket which certainly contained State papers, for it belonged to an agent of the Russian diplomatic service. The fact that the money in the safe remained untouched is sufficient proof of the matter. Georget is the grandson of a woman of high rank, who has always been a warm sympathiser with the Polish exiles, and he may have been influenced by her in helping these persons."

"My uncle would not spare the boy on that account if he discovered what he did, especially as some money was taken as well as the casket."

"So I have been told, but it is very difficult for me to believe it. I am satisfied that Georget did not take it."

"Probably Georget only allowed it to be taken; moreover, among the incoherent remarks that escaped him there was one that designated the thief."

"Designated him by name?"

"By a name that will have no significance to you. It was Ladislas; but I know the man."

"Indeed!" said the countess, quietly. "Who is he?"

"A foreigner; a Slav who led a mysterious life here for a time and then suddenly disappeared. He occupied a small house in the Rue Joffroy, and had a lady companion who vanished with him. Dr. Villagos knew her by sight, and pointed her out to me one evening at the skating rink."

"And you made love to her, of course."

"No; I escorted her home, and was very nearly murdered by some scoundrels who had followed me. It was Georget who saved me from their clutches."

"It seems to me you related this story the first time you called here."

"That's true; but I did not understand the situation then, now I do. Georget was acquainted with the plans of the lady who had been deputed to draw me into this trap; he had acted as her accomplice in the robbery, but as he was fond of me, he managed in such a way as to save me without compromising himself."

"Pray let us return to the subject of Monsieur de Carnoël. He is the only one of the persons concerned in whom I take an interest, and whom I am resolved to find, cost what it may."

"I think I have succeeded in finding him, for on taking Georget home to his grandmother, we passed a house which he recognised, and soon he remembered that he had fallen from the top of the garden wall. It was there he had fractured his skull, and at last he succeeded in recollecting what had induced him to climb it. He had seen Robert de Carnoël drive up in a splendid carriage, and enter that very house that morning; and he was certain Monsieur de Carnoël had not left it again, for he had watched the house all day. Besides, an instant before his fall, Georget saw Monsieur de Carnoël again. He saw him at a distance, behind a window, and holding a candle, which he moved to and fro as if making a signal."

"Then this happened a month ago, did it not?"

"Yes, on the very day I had the pleasure of accompanying you to the Bois."

"And the very day that Mademoiselle Dorgères was in the Allée des Bouleaux awaiting Monsieur de Carnoël, who failed to appear."

"He did not go because the people who had him in custody would not allow him to do so. But I shall surprise you when I tell you who occupies the house in which he was imprisoned. It is the Russian, whose casket was stolen from my uncle."

"Borisoff!" exclaimed the countess. "Ah, the wretch! He alone would be capable of such an infamous deed. He snared him, and we may deem ourselves fortunate if he has not killed him."

"What! would he be capable of that?"

"That man is a secret agent of the Russian police. He desires, at any cost, to discover by whom those papers were taken, and he would not shrink from anything to effect his purpose. Monsieur de Carnoël was accused; and Borisoff began by snaring him, and has probably threatened him with the most horrible punishment if he does not tell him what has become of the casket. I have not a minute to lose in saving this unfortunate young man, and I, only, can do it. So I entreat you to refrain from taking any steps in the matter."

"Refrain from taking any steps in the matter!" repeated Maxime. "But—that is—I have already done so."

"What have you done?" asked the countess, quickly.

"The most natural thing under the circumstances. After listening to Georget's story, and taking him home to his grandmother, I instantly repaired to the Rue de Vigny and asked to see Colonel Borisoff."

"It was madness. He did not receive you, I suppose?"

"I beg your pardon, madame, I was admitted at once. He knew my name very well, and thought I was sent by my uncle."

"Good heavens ! what did you say to him ?"

"I asked him first what he had done with Monsieur de Carnoël."

"All is lost !" murmured the countess.

"Why ?" exclaimed Maxime. "It seems to me that if I had not gone straight to the point, the colonel would have had time to prepare a reply. I hoped to take him unawares and embarrass him."

"Well, what was his answer ?"

"He began by asking me why I applied to him for information concerning that young man, whom he pretended he scarcely knew. But I reminded him of the theft of the casket, and his promise to discover Monsieur de Carnoël. He seemed surprised that I was so well informed, but he pretended that his search had resulted in nothing. Then I told him very plainly that Monsieur de Carnoël had been seen driving to his house in a carriage, that he had not been seen since, and that he must still be there."

"And in proceeding like this you hoped to make Borisoff admit what he had done, and surrender his prisoner ?"

"I confess that I acted without due reflection. I followed my first hasty impulse, which I deeply regret, since it does not meet with your approval," said Maxime, sadly, feeling that the countess thought his conduct absurd.

"Oh, I don't blame you in the least," murmured the countess. "You thought you were acting for the best. Only tell me how the interview terminated."

"Very badly. The colonel haughtily denied the charge, and I threatened to call in the aid of the police. I was very angry ; I was no longer master of myself, but the colonel did not attach any great importance to my threat, for he assumed an arrogant and contemptuous tone, which exasperated me still more. I talked to him then even more violently, and he ordered me to leave the house, which I did, with the announcement that my seconds would wait upon him at once."

"They have not done so, I hope ?"

"Not yet. I have not had time to look for any."

"And I trust you will not do so. Besides, Borisoff knows very well that it would be most unwise for him to fight with you, and he has an answer ready in case you send two of your friends to him. Moreover, have you never considered the danger of an attack on Colonel Borisoff ?"

"No, I have not. We are not in Russia ; and I do not see how this Russian agent can exercise any great power in Paris."

"You have just had a striking example of the manner in which he has treated a Frenchman who happened to offend him."

"Monsieur de Carnoël's case is a very peculiar one. He had fled from Paris, and was accused of robbery. It was not likely that any persons except his accusers would trouble themselves to ascertain what had become of him. The colonel would scarcely take such liberties with you or me."

"He would adopt some other course ; but I tell you this man is greatly to be feared, for he shrinks from nothing, and in this affair he has a dire vengeance to carry out. He has been baffled by those who obtained possession of his papers, and if he could annihilate them he would not hesitate to do so."

"Then you still believe that this theft was merely for a political object ! But by whom was it committed ?"

"By some proscribed exiles, probably. Europe is full of exiles, who, having suffered from Muscovite tyranny, now make war upon it from a distance. I have the good fortune not to be a Russian subject, so that I have no connection whatever with persons of the Borisoff stamp, but I always take the part of the weak, and that is the reason I feel an interest in the people this spy persecutes."

"Then if Monsieur de Carnoël had helped the exiles in their effort to obtain possession of the casket, you would still defend him?"

"Yes, certainly; but that was not the case. This young man is as innocent as you are. We know now who committed the crime since Georget has spoken. He has named a certain Ladislas. It is a Polish name, and he was probably a refugee. You have just told me that this Ladislas had suddenly disappeared, which only proves that Monsieur de Carnoël had nothing to do with the affair, for you have never heard that he had any acquaintance with suspicious foreigners. As to Georget, I admit that he might have lent a hand in such an undertaking, at his grandmother's instigation, but I certainly shall not question her on the subject, for I hope that before the lad is entirely well again, we shall have satisfactorily completed all arrangements with Colonel Borisoff. My only aim is to repair the injury that has been done to Monsieur de Carnoël."

"And I beg that you will accept my help," exclaimed Maxime; "but before placing myself at your orders allow me to give you some further information respecting the theft. You should know everything. I have not told you that my uncle's safe was twice attacked, and the first attempt was accompanied by some very strange incidents which only my friend Vignory and myself are aware of. One Wednesday we were going to spend the evening at my uncle's, and before entering the house we were surprised to see a light in the office. We entered it. All the doors were open, and a light was burning on the table. I took it to Vignory, who had hastened to the safe, and there we made a frightful discovery. The safe is protected by an apparatus which is so arranged as to seize hold of the wrist of any one attempting to open it without first taking certain precautions. This apparatus had acted, and a woman's hand remained in its grasp. To avoid arrest, she had allowed her hand to be amputated at the wrist."

"Do you think an ordinary thief would have done that?" inquired the countess, in a ringing voice.

"No, certainly not. I thought from the very first that there must have been some peculiar motive, and later when I heard that the Russian' casket had been taken, I realised that I was not mistaken. Vignory and I unfortunately concluded to keep the matter a secret. This woman could not have repeated the attempt, for she must have been very ill on account of the amputation."

"Even if she did not die of it," murmured the countess.

"It is certain that she had an accomplice—the Ladislas mentioned by Georget—and that the second time this accomplice, better informed than on the first occasion, opened the safe without accident, and took what he wanted. Permit me now to relate the story of the hand." And thereupon Maxime told the whole story of the severed hand and the bracelet, and the numerous adventures he had met with in trying to discover their owner.

When he had concluded, the countess said slowly: "From all that I have just heard I am satisfied that Monsieur de Carnoël is innocent. My

instinct had told me so before, but now I am convinced beyond a doubt. You tell me there were two attempts at robbery, and that the first took place during one of Monsieur Dorgères' receptions. Monsieur de Carnoël was probably in your uncle's drawing-room when the attempt was made."

"Yes, certainly; he never missed one of these gatherings."

"So he was not with the thieves. You may say that he had given them instructions; but this is extremely unlikely. Had the information been furnished by Monsieur Dorgères' secretary, the cashier's intimate friend, the information would have been more complete. The unfortunate woman would not have lost her hand, for she would have been aware of the defensive apparatus, and would have known how to prevent its action."

"All this is very true," murmured Maxime.

"So very true that I am amazed at the blindness that struck you all at the moment the robbery was discovered. To accuse a man merely because he is absent is something quite unheard of. However, I believe that the cashier also declared that a comparatively insignificant sum was missing, and this was believed on his affirmation."

"Certainly, unless one was to suppose that the cashier had stolen it himself."

"No such suspicion was aroused. Here are three men, M. Dorgères, Colonel Borisoff, and the cashier, brought together by an event which affects them all in different ways, and without reflection, almost without discussion, they unite in imputing the misdeed to a young man whose former life has been irreproachable."

"Appearances were against him—his sudden departure."

"But they all knew the cause of this departure. Your uncle knew very well that he had rendered Monsieur de Carnoël desperate by refusing him the hand of his daughter. The cashier was in the young man's confidence, and the Russian was made acquainted with the situation. Nevertheless, these gentlemen immediately decide that Monsieur de Carnoël is the vilest of wretches; that he has dishonoured himself to please one of Monsieur Borisoff's enemies, and to appropriate a few bank-notes; and instead of informing the authorities and giving him an opportunity to justify himself, they agree to abandon him to the pursuit and the vengeance of an interested, and consequently prejudiced, person."

Maxime, discomfited by this unexpected attack, hung his head and said nothing, as he could think of no answer to the clever reasoning of the countess.

"That Monsieur Dorgères should have allowed himself to be blinded by his prejudices," she continued; "that he should even have seized an unjust pretext to break off a marriage which was displeasing to him, does not surprise me. He wished to rid himself of Monsieur de Carnoël at any cost. Your uncle is an honest man in the strict meaning of the term, but there are sentiments he is incapable of understanding. As to the Russian, who is only a spy, it was but natural that he should eagerly seize the first clue offered him, and pursue Monsieur de Carnoël without respite or scruple, in default of another victim. But there is one person whose conduct in this unfortunate affair is absolutely inexplicable, and this is the cashier, Vignory."

"Vignory? Why, I assure you, madame, that he has behaved admirably. When Monsieur de Carnoël was first accused by my uncle, Vignory defended him with the utmost energy."

"Were you present at the time?" inquired Madame Yalta, coldly.

"No, but Vignory told me so himself, and he is incapable of telling a falsehood. Besides, how could he have done otherwise, when Monsieur de Carnoël was his most intimate friend?"

"And his favoured rival."

"That is not exactly the word. Vignory had long loved my cousin, and I had often urged him to declare himself; but he knew that Robert and Alice loved each other, and delicacy made him keep aloof. Vignory is the most timid and modest, as well as the most honourable of men. Had it been in his power to preserve Monsieur de Carnoël's honour, he would have done it, I assure you."

"Indeed! then is he really so deficient in shrewdness?" asked Madame Yalta, brusquely. And as Maxime made no reply, she repeatedly excitedly, "Is he really so stupid?"

"Stupid! why?"

"I did not think I should be obliged to explain it to you. What! here is a man who hears his best friend accused of an infamous act. He knows a fact that would at once change the aspect of affairs. This fact is known only to him of the three people present, the other two are ignorant of it, and he has only to speak to change their opinions. It is even probable that by comparing the different circumstances, his friend's innocence would be proved. And yet, this man is silent!"

"What do you mean?" stammered Maxime, although he began to understand what the countess was driving at.

"Monsieur Vignory is the cashier. He comes in one morning and finds the safe open. He sends for Monsieur Dorgères, who cries: 'It is Monsieur de Carnoël who has done it!' And Monsieur Vignory does not reply: 'No, it is not he. A previous attempt was made to open the safe, and a woman left her hand here. Monsieur de Carnoël had nothing to do with that first attempt, for he was passing the evening with you when it was made, and in a like manner he was not implicated in the second one.' What would your uncle have said to such reasoning? Certainly he would not have persisted in accusing his unfortunate secretary, merely because he had chosen an unfortunate moment to leave the house."

"But my uncle is very positive in his opinions, and he had resolved to get rid of Monsieur de Carnoël. Still, it is none the less true that Vignory would have done better to reveal the whole truth. He failed to do so no doubt, because his presence of mind deserted him, which is pardonable, certainly, under such trying circumstances."

"I don't agree with you. I think it was only from a fear lest he might compromise himself. He feared that he would be censured—as he well deserved to be—for his silence concerning the severed hand is inexplicable and inexcusable."

"I am responsible for Vignory's conduct in this matter. I entreated him to remain silent, and having always exerted a great influence over him, he consented."

"In this, too, you did not prove yourself a friend to Monsieur de Carnoël. Still, you could not foresee that he would be accused; but Vignory had only to open his lips for affairs to take an entirely different turn. With a word, he might have cleared his friend; but he took good care not to speak it. The intent to injure is evident, and in acting thus he yielded to a base sentiment—jealousy."

"It would be hard for me to believe that. I think that even now, if I

asked him to tell my uncle the adventure we concealed from him, he would not refuse to do so."

"Take good care not to do so, however. This late avowal would not improve Monsieur de Carnoël's situation ; and it is of the utmost importance that Monsieur Vignory should not be informed of my plans. If you persist in your generous resolve to help me in discovering Monsieur de Carnoël, I must exact a promise that you will not take Vignory into your confidence. I intend he shall remain in ignorance of all our operations and all our plans."

"That can be very easily managed. Vignory has no desire to meddle with the affair. He is so engrossed with thoughts of his approaching marriage and his recent appointment as my uncle's partner, that when I took Georget to him yesterday he received the boy almost coldly. I could see by his manner that this old story no longer interested him."

"I hope he is not aware that you know, or think you know, that Monsieur de Carnoël is Colonel Borisoff's prisoner."

"No, madame ; it was not until after my visit to the office that I passed the Russian's residence with Georget. Vignory and I parted almost angrily, and I don't need your recommendation to keep my own counsel in the matter."

"Thanks, I see I can count on you. First of all, Borisoff must feel satisfied that you have abandoned the step with which you threatened him. He must hear nothing more from you, so that he may conclude you acted rashly yesterday, and will not return."

"It is a very trying part you impose upon me."

"No ; your altercation with him did not go far enough to make a duel obligatory on your side, and you certainly need fear no challenge on the part of Borisoff. He does not wish to be disturbed."

"Since you desire it, I will consent not to molest him. But may I ask how I can serve you ?"

"By refraining from any measures whatever until I authorise you. To free Monsieur de Carnoël, I am the only person who can act to advantage—the only person in the world."

"In your present condition ?"

"Some one will act for me. I shall not appear at all, but will direct everything. You will not remain in uncertainty. Even now the colonel is certainly making arrangements to get rid of Monsieur de Carnoël. I cannot say that he intends to kill him ; but he certainly won't keep him in the house after your warning, and so I have not a moment to lose. Three days from now you will know if I have succeeded."

"How shall I learn ?"

"By coming to see me. If my servants tell you I am not at home, insist upon speaking to my maid. She has my orders, and she will bring you to me. If Monsieur Villagos opposes you, as he might do if he suspected that the deliverance of Monsieur de Carnoël was occupying our attention, I will tell you a means of overcoming his opposition. Have you the ring I gave you yesterday ?"

"It shall never leave me unless you reclaim it."

"On the contrary, I beg you will keep it, and show it to the doctor in case he wishes to prevent you from seeing me, but only under those circumstances."

"And will he, like Madame Piriac, obey this talisman ?"

"He will obey it. Perhaps he will ask you some questions, but do not

answer them. And now that I have told you all I can tell you at present,* added the countess, "will you do me the favour to ring for my maid, who will show you out. I am momentarily expecting Monsieur Villagos, and I don't wish him to find you here."

Maxime was stretching out his hand to pull the silken cord that hung near the invalid's bed, when a cry resounded in his ears—a cry that proceeded from the room which Alice had entered to avoid a meeting with her cousin. "Don't ring," said the countess quickly, who had started on hearing this cry.

"It sounded like a woman's voice," murmured Maxime.

"It is a woman, but I don't know why she called out in such a manner."

"I don't think it was a call. The cry she just uttered was one of fear or surprise. If she wished any one to come to her help she would repeat it."

"There is nothing to prevent her from coming out. The door is not locked. Besides, this person is alone, so that she has nothing to fear."

"Then there only remains for me to take leave of you. Shall I wait for your maid?"

Madame Yalta seemed greatly perplexed, and her eyes wandered from Maxime, who stood awaiting her instructions, to the tapestry hanging that concealed the entrance to her dressing-room. "No," she said at last, "you must not go away like that. There is some one in that room who entered it to avoid a meeting with you, but who will forgive me for disregarding a girlish fancy. Go in, I beg, and fetch her."

Maxime, greatly puzzled, obeyed without remark. He opened the door, and found himself face to face with Alice Dorgères, who was pale, agitated, and trembling. The more astonished of the two was unquestionably Maxime, for he had not the slightest suspicion that his cousin was in the house; still he did not lose his presence of mind. He divined that Alice must have yielded to a sudden impulse to go and see Madame Yalta, and that perhaps she had already repented of having done so. "Yes, it is I," he exclaimed, laughing. "The countess ordered me to make an investigation, for your shriek just now alarmed her, and she wishes to know if you need assistance. Tell me what has happened."

"Nothing," stammered the young girl; "a nervous shock, a senseless fright. Take me away. I wish to go at once."

Maxime led her to the bedside of the countess, who looked at her with close attention. "Mademoiselle," she said, in a grave and almost agitated voice, "you could not remain any longer in that room, which I am sorry you ever entered. Still, it is important that your visit should not be known, and it is scarcely likely we shall meet again. Your cousin knows everything, and no one is better able to give you advice if you desire it. I hope that the truth will soon be revealed; that the innocence of Monsieur de Carnoël will be established, and that he will speedily reappear to defend himself. Before we separate, mademoiselle, I have one request to make. I beg that you will speak to no one, under any pretext whatever, of anything you may have seen here; to no one, understanding, neither now nor ever."

"I promise," murmured Mademoiselle Dorgères.

"I shall depend upon you," said the countess, rather coldly. "Monsieur Dorgères, please ring, and my maid will show you out." And as Maxime obeyed her, looking at her with a somewhat astonished air, she added: "Remember, not a word, not a single step, without my knowledge. I alone must act; our success depends upon it."

Maxime and Alice then retired. They walked on side by side without speaking for some little time ; but on reaching the end of the Rue Beaujon, Maxime asked—"Why didn't you trust me? If I had known that you wished to see the countess, I would have spared you the unpleasantness of going there alone."

"I made up my mind last night, and I wished to carry my decision into execution at once. It was my conversation with you yesterday which impelled me to seek an interview with her. You told me that the countess was so sure of M. de Carnoël's innocence that I wished to question her. She has sworn that she will save him ; but what is her oath worth? Does she even know whether Robert de Carnoël is in Paris, or whether he is alive?"

"She did not know when you came in, but she knows it now. But did you not overhear our conversation?"

"You cannot ask me such a question seriously."

"No ; it is absurd. You are not in the habit of listening at doors. Ah, well ! it was I who told the countess that Robert was not dead, but that he is still in Paris."

"Where is he?" exclaimed the young girl.

"This morning I could have told you, but I have just sworn to keep a secret that is known only to the countess and myself. It is the only means of delivering Monsieur de Carnoël. Still, I am to have no hand in the matter. You heard the last words she addressed to me."

"She also bids me be silent."

"Upon what subject?"

"Don't question me. That house is full of mysteries."

"I begin to believe it. We will refrain from questioning each other, then, though I should like to know what course you intend to pursue. Your father and Vignory are in complete ignorance of all this. Your father is convinced that nothing more will ever be heard of Robert de Carnoël, and that you will be the happiest of women. Vignory is basking in blissful security. He has almost forgotten that you ever loved his unfortunate friend—and does not doubt that you will soon forget him altogether. Do you intend to leave them to their illusions?"

"No," replied Alice, firmly ; "I am going to tell my father this very day that I have changed my mind, and that I shall never marry."

"Your father might take you at your word, and say : 'You shall marry neither Vignory nor Robert.'"

"It is my dearest wish not to marry any one."

"My dear Alice, you are not saying what you really think ; but this is no time for discussion. Reserve your decision for a few days, and above all, don't declare your opinion. Maintain a prudent silence, or, what would be still better, say that you are ill, and need rest. You will secure a respite of a week in this way, which is more time than you will need to decide what to do respecting Monsieur de Carnoël."

"Are you, too, on his side?" inquired Mademoiselle Dorgères, with emotion.

"Yes, for I am sure he has been shamefully slandered. I am even astonished that I listened for an instant to the odious suspicions which found such ready credence. And I feel less satisfied respecting Vignory since the countess has called my attention to certain inexplicable points in his conduct."

"Ah, then I can speak at last," exclaimed Alice. "Although I en-

gaged myself to this man in a moment of rage and despair, I would die rather than marry him. If he had any heart, he would never have accepted what I offered him—indifference and a large fortune. His resignation is merely calculation, and his humility, baseness.”

“You are going too far,” replied Maxime; “but upon my word I scarcely have the heart to blame you, and I repeat that you can depend upon me. We must part now, and I don’t know if I shall be able to see you to-morrow. Should you wish to see me for any reason, write to me, and then perhaps I shall be able to tell you all respecting Monsieur de Carnoël that the countess bade me conceal until further orders.”

“And I will perhaps tell you what I just now saw at her house,” muttered Alice, in a subdued tone.

XIV

AFTER the explosion that followed Maxime’s ill-advised visit, Colonel Borisoff quickly regained his wonted calmness. It was necessary for him to come to a decision on a very delicate question. The step taken by Maxime proved nothing, except that an almost idiotic lad had declared that M. de Carnoël was forcibly detained in the colonel’s house—an improbable statement which was not likely to gain credence anywhere, so the colonel need not trouble himself much about it. Nor was the threat of a duel any more serious; and as young Dorgères’ seconds had not made their appearance the next day at noon, the colonel ceased to expect them.

But M. Borisoff naturally felt very anxious respecting his prisoner. He could not detain him indefinitely, nor could he release him without danger of a scandal, which he greatly dreaded. To send him to Siberia, as he had threatened, would do no good, since it would utterly fail to solve the difficulty. Moreover, in his last interview with the colonel, Robert had spoken with so much earnestness and energy that he had awakened doubts even in the mind of his jailer, who began to ask himself if it would not be as well to seek the accomplice elsewhere. The thieves must certainly be conspirators—enemies of the Russian Government. That they had an accomplice in the banker’s house was equally certain; but what was there to prove that this accomplice was M. de Carnoël? Why might it not have been some other person? There was more than one clerk in the banker’s employ. Suspicion might reasonably fall upon the cashier himself as well as on any office boy. “What might we not have discovered,” the colonel said to himself, “if, instead of dogging the steps of this young man, we had carefully watched the other employés? Perhaps there is yet time. But what shall I do with Carnoël? I am almost tempted to believe that Vacili is right, and that I shall be compelled to release him, asking him to give me his word of honour to say nothing about the events of the past month.”

These perplexities engrossed M. Borisoff all the evening and all night, and they led him, in the first place, to countermand his orders for the journey to Siberia. In his secret heart the colonel feared he would be blamed for resorting to a measure of such questionable utility; and so he decided to temporise, and to hold more frequent interviews with M. Dorgères, in order to study the habits of the banker’s subordinates more closely. He said to himself that he could free himself from his embarrassing position at any time by releasing M. de Carnoël, and by promising to

defend him from the accusation of theft if he would keep silent respecting his adventure. And so freeing himself from anxiety, M. Borisoff went out for a ride, and determined to spend the evening according to his fancy. He dismounted at the door of his club-house, and as he intended to dine there he sent away his horse and his groom. He was in the habit of spending his time from four to six at the club, and in such cases his valet had orders to bring him his evening clothes. He soon found a place at a whist-table, and had won a large sum when he rose to make his toilet. He was just putting the finishing touch to it when a card was brought him from a gentleman who desired to speak with him on urgent business. The name was unknown to him, but it was a Russian one, and the card bore a peculiar mark in the corner. Surprised to see this sign, which was intelligible only to secret agents, the colonel concluded he must grant an audience to the person who had made use of it, but that he would shorten the interview if he did not find the subject worthy of attention.

His compatriot was awaiting him in one of the rooms reserved for members to receive their friends. He was a man who looked still young, of irreproachable appearance and elegantly attired, and he accosted the colonel with a Russian phrase which was even more significant than the mark on the visiting card. There was no longer any room for doubt. The stranger belonged to the government police, and occupied, too, an important position in it. What had brought him to Paris? that was the question; and Borisoff experienced a vague disquietude.

"My dear Alexis Stefanowitch," said the stranger, addressing him, in accordance with the national custom, by his Christian name, followed by that of his father; "this is a poor place for conversation, and I have a host of things to tell you. Let us go and dine together at a restaurant."

"Willingly," replied the colonel, deeming it necessary to make the best of the situation. "Which do you prefer, my dear Mouriatine?"

"Say Ivan Ivanowitch. Let us go to Bignon's. I arrived this morning, and after spending sixty hours in an express train I feel a desire for a good meal."

The colonel, anxious for an explanation, led his compatriot out through the ante-chamber, and as soon as they reached the boulevard, which was comparatively deserted, the stranger said, still in Russian: "You don't know me, and no doubt you don't recollect the name of Mouriatine. It isn't surprising. I was on duty in our Polish provinces while you were with the general in St. Petersburg, and I returned to the Department after you were sent abroad. You see, my dear Alexis, I am inclined to treat you as a comrade, and consequently I don't begin by displaying my credentials. I will do so, however, whenever you like. Would you like to hear the password?" And he whispered a word in the ear of the colonel, who on hearing it, said: "It was unnecessary, my dear Ivan; but tell me, have you come on any important mission?"

"So important that the general only gave me two hours to make my preparations."

"And what is the purport of this mission?"

"It concerns you, my dear Alexis Stefanowitch. Oh! don't be frightened. You know at the central office great importance is attached even to the slightest rumour; and as soon as any report arrives, measures are immediately taken to ascertain the truth of it. As regards yourself, the chief has received a formal accusation against you."

"Of what am I accused, pray?"

"First, of negligence, or rather imprudence. It seems that you placed all your important papers in a casket, and then, strange to say, deposited this casket with your banker."

"I had good reason to presume that it would be safer there than in my own house. I am known to the Nihilists, who have emissaries everywhere, and I have some servants whom I do not altogether trust."

"It is none the less true that this box has been stolen, and stolen undoubtedly by the very persons whose machinations you dreaded."

"True; and I did very wrong not to acknowledge the fact to those who had a right to know what had taken place; but I had reasons for my course, which I will presently explain. May I inquire who furnished the information?"

"Don't you suspect? There is a French proverb that says that a man's betrayers are always those of his own household. And you have a major-domo, my dear Alexis Stefanowitch."

"Vacili? What! that rascal has dared to play the spy and communicate with the Department."

"I may as well tell you that he was authorised to do so. You have not thought of it, probably, but you must know that our agents in foreign countries are always under surveillance. It is a system of mutual observation against which it is useless to protest; and I earnestly advise you not to let the weight of your anger fall upon this subordinate, who, after all, has only performed his duty."

"I will guard against it. He would be quite capable of avenging himself by inventing slanders against me. Perhaps he has already done so, for I can hardly believe he has been satisfied with disclosing the theft of the casket."

"He wrote that, instead of entering upon an intelligent investigation, you had been persistently following a mistaken clue from the very first."

"Then he has told you that I have my hand upon a young man whom I presumed to be the thieves' accomplice?"

"He has told us all. He has even told us that to rid yourself of this young man, whose father was formerly connected with the French Embassy in St. Petersburg, you intended to use the secret methods to which we resort only on great occasions; and I won't conceal the fact that he has censured your conduct severely."

"It is true that, despairing of extorting anything from Carnoël, I had thought of sending him to Siberia; but I have abandoned that idea. If you can indicate any means by which I can dispose of him, without compromising myself, you would oblige me infinitely. Vacili's plan is merely to let the fellow go, after making him swear that he will not complain to the French authorities, and to watch him afterwards without his knowledge."

"That would not be such a bad idea. We will talk it over at dinner; and after dinner, suppose we go to the opera."

"I see with pleasure that your business does not prevent you from thinking of the attractions of Paris."

"On the contrary, there is a close connection between the two, as you will see. But let us begin with a good dinner. I have a voracious appetite, and you will see me do ample justice to French wines and cookery."

They had reached the door of Bignon's new restaurant in the Avenue de l'Opéra. M. Borisoff was by no means averse to entering it. It seemed

to him that Ivan Ivanowitch's mission was far more complicated than he had at first supposed, and that he had probably been sent to take his place, or at least to direct him, under pretext of seconding his efforts; and he hoped that at the table this representative of the great chief would reveal his real object. Wine unloosens the most discreet tongue, and Russians are not generally considered models of sobriety. The restaurant was almost empty, for the fashionable dinner-hour had not yet arrived. Ivan Ivanowitch spoke French as fluently as his native tongue, and ordered his repast with an ease which instantly won him the respect of the attendants. No one took him for a Russian, and even the head waiter was deceived respecting his nationality until after the first course, when the colonel, who had up to that time confined himself to current trifles, prudently reverted to his native tongue before leading the conversation to a more interesting topic. He first questioned Mouriatine very adroitly about the chief and certain employes of the department, and if he had felt any doubt concerning the authenticity of the new-comer's mission this doubt could not fail to be dispelled by the replies he received. The envoy had a perfect knowledge of the secret workings of the department which he represented, could give the names of all the agents, and had a very accurate appreciation of their true value. Evidently, he occupied an important post in the government police service.

"My friend," he said, pouring out a twelfth glass of champagne for the colonel, "I feel a desire to protest in advance against a motive which you probably attribute to me. I did not come to Paris for the purpose of upholding your major-domo against you; in fact he will remain ignorant of the object of my mission. This man must not suppose that his denunciations have been listened to at St. Petersburg. It would be a very bad precedent. But you and I will consult together, and see if something cannot be done. Some important papers have been stolen from you; it is a misfortune, but not an irreparable one. We must reach the instigators of the act, and not the miserable subordinates, who did not know the real object of the scoundrels with whom they were connected."

"I hoped to reach these instigators by pursuing the subordinates, and I still believe that if Carnoël is in any way implicated in this robbery it was a woman who inveigled him into it, and a woman who occupies a high position in the society."

"Rightly argued; but you haven't the slightest idea who this woman is. Between ourselves, my dear friend, I think you might have displayed more sagacity during your sojourn in this country. For instance, we know that you were engaged in watching a number of Russians who are not worth the trouble, when it is well-nigh certain that these rascally Nihilists are directed in this country by a Frenchwoman, and that this Frenchwoman——But what is the matter, my friend, you are no longer listening——"

"Excuse me," murmured Borisoff, "but a gentleman who just came in diverted my attention for a moment."

"That tall young man at the end of the room?"

"Yes. He is the nephew of my banker; he is acquainted with the fact of the robbery, and yesterday he took it into his head to ask me what I had done with Monsieur de Carnoël. I showed him the door. He told me I should receive a visit from his seconds. I have not yet seen them. But I am not free from anxiety in regard to this hare-brained youth."

"He does not show much inclination to pick a quarrel with you. See, he has taken a seat a long way from us, and doesn't even seem to recognise you."

This was true. Maxime had entered by a mere chance, and faithful to his promise to the countess, he had not the slightest intention of resuming the stormy interview of the previous day ; so he did not even glance at Borisoff, but the colonel's companion had attracted his attention from the first, and while pretending to read the bill of fare, he was furtively watching Mouriatine. "I have certainly seen that face somewhere," he said to himself. "Where can I have met that man? Not in the street; for in that case I should not have noticed him. This much is certain; he isn't a Frenchman; and it is probable he is a Russian, as he is dining with that hound Borisoff. Ah! if I hadn't promised the countess to remain perfectly quiet for three days, how I would break in upon their little entertainment, if only to learn the name of the colonel's new friend."

The two foreigners continued their dinner and their conversation as before. Mouriatine, especially, seemed desirous of avoiding any altercation, and he eagerly resumed: "Let us forget this gentleman, and return to our subject. We have very recently received information which leads us to suppose that the Frenchwoman I referred to is the Nihilist leader in Paris, and that it was she who planned the theft of your casket. She is French by birth, but of Polish origin, and secretly in league with the enemies of Russia."

"It is very strange that she has not previously aroused suspicion if she lives in Paris."

"She was denounced to us only a short time ago; but you may perhaps have met her, although you only move in the highest circles, which is a mistake—a very great mistake, as our chief remarked to me."

"In what society must I move to satisfy him?"

"You must frequent all classes, even worthless women whom you have neglected entirely."

"There is nothing to be learned from them. You know as well as I do that in this country women of that stamp don't meddle with politics, and especially foreign politics. They very willingly despoil us Russians; but they do not conspire against our government."

"There are exceptions; and the person I have mentioned is one of them. She is not one of those creatures one meets everywhere. She does not court notoriety, and does not always reside in Paris. She may be seen at Nice, Monaco, and Geneva; and her journeys have but one object. It was at Geneva that she was first pointed out to me last summer. I was introduced to her by one of our compatriots whom she had bewitched, and must have ruined. I suspected then that she was enrolled among the Nihilists, but I had no proofs of it, and did not trouble myself about her. But this winter we have received detailed accounts of her sayings and doings. Her position gives her every facility for connecting herself with such Russians as can furnish her with useful information. For instance, two months ago she was here, openly protected by one of our generals who was absent on leave."

"I ought, at least, to know her name," murmured Borisoff.

"She changes it very frequently. When I met her she was known as Madame de Garches. Here she has assumed some commonplace name, I am told. But if you were more familiar with what goes on in such society, this person's peculiarities could not have failed to attract your attention, to say nothing of her beauty, which is really marvellous."

"I confess that I really did not suspect her existence," said the colonel,

evidently piqued ; "and, until the contrary is proved, you must allow me to doubt that she stole my papers."

"She did not steal them herself ; but they were stolen by her orders, and under her directions."

"Then she knows me?"

"It is quite possible that she has never seen you ; but she must be perfectly acquainted with the mission you are fulfilling here, and have known about the deposit of this casket with your banker. Obscure but well-informed emissaries, ever ready to do this woman's bidding, swarm round her. She had only to make a sign, and the casket was hers."

"You admit, then, that Carnoël belonged to this band, and that I did right to put him in a safe place?"

"I am not yet fully decided on that point. It is quite possible that he gave her information, and did so undesignedly, for the woman is very skilful. It will be easy for me to satisfy myself on that score."

"I am curious to see how you will proceed in this matter."

"My dear Alexis Stefanowitch, you shall see, and speedily. I came to Paris for the express purpose of clearing up this mystery, and, if you like, we will begin this very evening at the opera. She will, no doubt, be there. She returned to Paris quite recently, without a protector of any sort, and she is now spreading her net in the hope of capturing a Russian of rank to serve her purpose without suspecting it. Why shouldn't you be this Russian?"

"I? But what you propose is madness. You have just told me that she is well acquainted with my mission here."

"All the more reason why she should try to dazzle you. If she hasn't attempted it already, it is only because she hasn't found any opportunity to do so. Recollect, she imagines that you will take her for an ordinary adventuress, for she can't suspect that I have given you any information about her. Imagining that she has an advantage over you, she will ask nothing better than to ingratiate herself with you. You are well aware that this is the Nihilist method. These women resort to all sorts of expedients to win the friendship and confidence of those who are fighting their society, in order to discover their secrets and prevent them from action. They always have one foot in the enemy's camp ; and it is in this way they are able to do so much mischief. This is an opportunity to pay them back with interest."

"By allowing myself to be captivated by this young woman?" inquired the colonel, ironically.

"Yes ; and by profiting by the advantage you will have over her. You can see her hand, but she cannot see yours. You need only go as far as it suits you, and however crafty she may be she will be sure to let you find out her vulnerable point sooner or later. Besides, you will have an ally in me. When I met her last summer I let her suppose that I was of liberal opinions, and it will be easy for me to make this liberalism even more pronounced until I have succeeded in gaining her confidence."

"But if she sees you with me, it will be hard for her to believe that you are sincere?"

"Oh, I shan't be extravagant in my support. I shall be guided by circumstances. What I desire most of all is to know if your prisoner was really implicated in the theft, and if not, I have found a way to settle the difficulty without compromising any one."

"And you wish to begin operations at the opera this evening?" said Borisoff, shaking his head.

"Yes, if we meet the lady there, as I hope we shall. But tell me, don't you think that young man down there is watching us rather more than necessary—the one who called on you to make inquiries about Monsieur de Carnoël?"

"He is a young idiot, unworthy of notice."

"Possibly; but if you take my advice, we will begin the siege before he finishes his dinner. I don't care for him to follow us to the opera. He annoys me, and, under other circumstances, I should like to give him a pretty sword-thrust," growled Mouriatine, describing in the air the lunge with which he would have been pleased to favour Maxime.

At the same instant Maxime, struck by a sudden reminiscence, muttered: "Ah! I recognise him now. That's the fellow I saw fencing with the countess the first time Villagos took me to the house. I even recollect that she called him by name, some Polish name, by the way."

Meanwhile Mouriatine shrugged his shoulders, and remarked to Colonel Borisoff: "Bah! after all I don't know why I should trouble myself. This young man isn't thinking of us, and does not seem likely to spend the evening at the opera, for he is not in full dress. Let us send for coffee and light our cigars. We will go out on the boulevard and smoke there."

"You are right," replied Borisoff, "let us take a turn before going to the opera. It will take the gentleman some time to finish his dinner, and he will lose sight of us, even if he thinks of following us, which I doubt very much. You told me you expected to find this lady at the opera to-night. May I inquire upon what you base this hope, since you have come straight from St. Petersburg?"

"I can only say that Friday is her usual day for attending the opera. We have received very precise information respecting her habits, you see; so the chances are that we shall find her there; if not, she will be there to-morrow or the next day."

"You still insist upon presenting me, then?" inquired the colonel, after a pause spent in sipping the coffee which had just been served.

"I do, but in your interest, recollect," replied his companion.

There was a pause, and the two men looked at each other. At the other end of the room sat another man, Maxime, who was also looking at them, although apparently contemplating a partridge which a waiter had just served him. "The more I look at that fellow," thought Maxime, "the more certain I am that he is the person I saw fencing with Madame Yalta. He is in her employ, and his name is Kardiki. How is it that I find him dining in the most expensive restaurant in Paris, and attired in the height of fashion? Still, that is nothing after all. The fencing-master may love good wines and have plenty of money; but it is this intimacy with Borisoff that seems inexplicable."

Meanwhile the two Russians resumed their conversation: "How will an acquaintance with this adventuress be of advantage to me?" inquired Borisoff, rather hesitatingly.

"I thought I had already explained the matter," replied Mouriatine, in a careless tone: "but I am ready to begin again, if you like. This adventuress, as you call her, is known to be an exceedingly dangerous person; and if you succeed in suppressing her without a disturbance, you will regain your reputation for cleverness which the loss of the casket has

considerably impaired. It is the damsel in question who will be sent to Siberia, and not Monsieur de Carnoël."

"Really I begin to believe you are right," said Borisoff. "But let us settle our bill and go, for it seems to me that this Frenchman is stealthily watching us, and I am anxious to throw him off the scent." Mouriatine was of the same opinion, and so he summoned the waiter and called for the bill.

"It is inconceivable that Borisoff and the fencing-master should be intimate friends," muttered Maxime, cramming down his truffles, in order to end his dinner as speedily as possible. "Borisoff is a secret agent in the employ of the Russian Government, or in other words, a spy. Madame Yalta despises and detests him. I am certain she is no conspirator, but she perhaps knows persons who are. Is this man betraying his mistress? Perhaps she, too, has her secrets. Who knows but what Kardiki is selling them to this man whom we regard as Robert de Carnoël's jailer? The countess made me promise not to take any action against Borisoff; but I did not promise to shut my eyes when I met him. I have a right to go where he goes, and even to follow any gentleman of his acquaintance; and I'll do so."

Meanwhile, the Russians had paid their bill, and had risen to put on their overcoats. Maxime would willingly have sacrificed the remainder of his dinner, but he could not leave his scarcely-tasted partridge and rush out of the restaurant without attracting the attention of the very persons he wished to watch. So he was obliged to resign himself to their departure, but he resolved to shorten his repast as much as possible, which he did by swallowing prodigious mouthfuls. He satisfied himself by a glance that they had gone in the direction of the boulevard, and flattered himself he should succeed in finding them, and in following them at a distance without attracting their notice until they separated, when he could devote his attention exclusively to the fencing-master. He had relinquished the colonel to the countess; but he might and must watch these suspicious proceedings on the part of one of her hirelings.

"The Frenchman is distanced," remarked Borisoff on reaching the boulevard, "and we have plenty of time to finish our cigars before entering the opera-house."

"Especially as I have taken the precaution to secure two stalls in the immediate neighbourhood of the woman's box."

"I see you have thought of everything; and yet, if you had not found me, which was by no means unlikely, as I was not expecting you——"

"I should have gone to the opera alone, and have told you about it afterwards, for I am not inclined to miss any opportunity of meeting the woman in question; but when I called at your house your servants told me you intended to dine at the club, so I hastened there at once. By the way, you are very comfortably situated. Is it in that handsome house in the Rue de Vigny that your prisoner is confined?"

"Yes, and I assure you that he is very safe there. The house is large and completely detached, and my prisoner is as well guarded as if he were shut up in a fortress at St. Petersburg."

"But you must have been obliged to take your servants into your confidence?"

"True; but they are all old soldiers, detailed for special duty on the secret service, and accustomed to passive obedience. If I wished to rid myself of the Frenchman I should only have to say so."

"But you have contented yourself with shutting him up in a cellar?"

"That was not necessary. I placed him in a large hall which serves me as a library. The doors of this apartment are all securely locked and guarded. The windows open upon the garden, and are at least thirty feet above the ground. It would be impossible for him to make his escape, and any communication with the outer world is equally impossible. I have no neighbours."

After a turn on the boulevard, the pair had now returned to the Place de l'Opéra. If either of them had glanced back, he would have seen that Maxime was only a short distance behind. After finishing his dinner he had started off in pursuit of the Russians, and came upon them at last just as they turned the corner. "They are going to the opera," he murmured. "They are evidently on very intimate terms. This Kardiki must be a traitor, and I ought to warn the countess. I am not in evening dress, and I shall be taken for a clerk or provincial; but I must know what those foreigners are going to do."

Being a regular subscriber to the opera, Maxime was not obliged to procure a ticket. He allowed the two foreigners to advance, and five minutes afterwards presented himself at the door. His attire suggested an idea which he promptly adopted, and instead of taking his usual seat, he remained in the passage, in order to ascertain where the two Russians had seated themselves, and then to secure a position where he would not lose sight of them. This manœuvre was successful. From the nook in which he was hiding he saw them settle down in the stalls, and he could remain in the place he had chosen until the rising of the curtain.

Borisoff and Mouriatine had no suspicion of his presence, and were engaged in a survey of the boxes. After a rapid inspection, Mouriatine remarked: "She has not yet arrived."

"Are you certain she will come?" asked Borisoff, who would probably not have been sorry to find his companion's sagacity at fault.

"Certain? No, of course not. One is never certain what a woman will do, and especially a woman of that stamp. But it isn't late, and I do not at all despair of seeing her appear during the second act. Probably she will be alone, for at Geneva she went everywhere without the sign of an escort. She was known there as *La Solitaire*. Still, it is possible that she has changed her habits here."

"Does she understand Russian?"

"She pretends she doesn't, but I don't believe her. I suspect that she understands it perfectly, so I need hardly say that I shall not make use of our native language in telling you any secrets in her presence."

"Ah, there is a pretty woman just coming in on our right," said Borisoff.

"It is she, my friend," rejoined Mouriatine. "I should know her among a thousand only by her eyes."

"They are wonderfully beautiful, I admit. I think I have never seen any to equal them. It is strange I have never seen her before. I cannot understand why she has never been pointed out to me."

"I have already told you that she only appears in Paris now and then, and when she comes she does not care to exhibit herself."

"She seems to be examining the stalls with remarkable perseverance. One would think she had recognised some one. See, she is directing her glass to the seats on our left, but I see only a few insignificant persons there."

"Insignificant to you, but perhaps not to her."

"Ah! she ceases her scrutiny. Behold her in all her splendour!"

The new-comer now appeared at the front of the box, and her wonderful beauty attracted every eye. As she laid down her opera-glass Maxime suddenly recognised her, and he could scarcely believe his eyes. "She, Madame Sergent, here!" he wondered. "Ah, this is a little too much! What, after the trick she played me, she dares to appear openly at the opera, and in the first tier, too! She probably left Paris and has since returned, imagining I should trouble myself no more about her. She has not brought the Carpathian bear back with her, I see. She has probably left him in his native land, and intends to replace him by one of the same species. If she thinks to escape like this she is mistaken. I intend to compel her to explain the robbery of my uncle's safe. As for the man Borisoff, it doesn't matter very much how he finishes his evening, for I shall denounce him to the countess in any case; but if I allow this opportunity to put my hand on Madame Sergent to pass by unimproved, it may never present itself again. I suppose she has taken good care not to return to her old quarters in the Rue Jouffroy, so the surest way would be to go to her box at once, and demand an immediate explanation."

The moment seemed favourable, for the second act was about to begin. Maxime, before rising, cast one more glance at the box, and a most startling sight presented itself. Colonel Borisoff and his companion were about to leave their seats, and Madame Sergent was smiling at them. Maxime thought he must be mistaken; but as the two foreigners passed along he distinctly saw that they bowed to the lady, and that she returned the salutation. "They know her," he muttered, as he paused in consternation.

The situation did, indeed, appear strange. Here, on the one side, was the Countess Yalta's fencing-master exchanging gracious smiles with an accomplice of the persons who had stolen the casket; and, wonder of wonders, the owner of the casket on the best of terms with the friend of the thieves, and going to join this woman!

"I was astonished just now to see the two men dining together," thought Maxime, "but this is really incomprehensible."

The more he reflected the more monstrous this intimacy seemed. He wondered if all these people had conspired together to play a comedy at his expense, and that of Robert de Carnoël. He even went so far as to feel misgivings respecting Madame Yalta—this countess who knew so many strange things, and who seemed to be such a lover of intrigue. "Is this man betraying her, or is she deceiving me?" he asked himself. "The devil take the Russians, the Poles, and these great foreign ladies! I have had enough of their intrigues, and I am going to break through all their snares. I am not afraid of any of them, and I certainly have a right to call Madame Sergent to account." But it was easier to decide upon this plan than to carry it into execution. A man cannot rush into a lady's box, in the middle of a performance, to question her about her former conduct, in the presence of two gentlemen who are not responsible for her behaviour and deeds. An incursion of this kind could only result in a quarrel, and quarrels never explain anything. So Maxime could only watch and wait, though his heart was filled with rage.

Meanwhile the adventure planned by Mouriatine was assuming serious shape. The woman who had just returned from Geneva, the former marvel of the skating-rink, had deigned to glance at the spectators near

her ; and, as she did so, her sparkling orbs had met the grey eyes of Mouriatine, and smiles were exchanged. Then a courteous and respectful bow from the envoy elicited a gracious inclination of the head from the lady, followed by a significant movement of her fan inviting Mouriatine to come to her box. Thereupon he replied by another gesture, indicating his companion, and meaning : "Impossible to join you. I have a friend whom I cannot leave." To this the lady responded by a sign that might be translated as : "No matter ; bring your friend and introduce him to me. I shall be delighted to see him as well as yourself." So the two Russians left their seats and repaired to the box, where the lady with the radiant eyes offered her hand to Mouriatine, exclaiming : "Good evening, my dear friend. You can scarcely imagine how happy I am to meet you. I have just arrived from Monaco alone, and have not yet seen a friendly face. You recognised me at once ! That's very strange."

"You are not one of those a person is likely to forget," replied Ivan Ivanowitch.

"Oh, after a six months' absence a person has a right to forget any one. But be kind enough to introduce this gentleman, who has had the goodness to accompany you here."

"Colonel Borisoff, one of my fellow-countrymen. My dear colonel, we are in the box of Madame de Garches."

"True, it was necessary for you to present *me*, also, for your friend does not know me, I suppose."

"No, madame," replied the colonel, "and I am really surprised that I have not remarked you before, however short your sojourn in Paris may have been, for beauty like yours cannot pass unnoticed anywhere."

"You are flattering me, colonel, and I warn you that I don't like compliments. Take a seat, and we will talk on any subject you please, except myself. Your friend will tell you that I had established this rule last summer when I had the pleasure of meeting him in Switzerland, and that all my little circle of friends submitted to it."

"Oh, they refused to submit sometimes," said Mouriatine, gaily. "I believe that I even made you two or three declarations of love, but unfortunately without any result, for you had such a way of receiving them——"

"I have not changed my habits ; I seek friends, but fly from lovers."

"Excuse my frankness, but it seems to me one of my countrymen once succeeded in winning your favour."

"Who ? That blockhead of a general ? Do not refer to him ; he was one of my mistakes. He gained my confidence by promising me some extraordinary ascensions. He proposed climbing Mont Blanc, and scaling the Jungfrau ; but I could never tempt him beyond the Royal Hotel at Chamounix or the promenade at Interlaken. I don't like cautious people, and so I left him there."

"My friend Borisoff is rashness personified," said Mouriatine, laughing heartily.

"Take care," said the lady, "you will make me wish to put his courage to the test."

These words evidently disconcerted the colonel. To tell the truth, he had been ill at ease ever since his entrance into the box, though he did not usually lack assurance. But presented to a strange lady by a friend who had fallen from the sky like an aërolite, Borisoff no longer felt sure of his ground. Besides, he had to contend against a pair of

beautiful eyes, the like of which he had never seen before, and which were fixed upon him with disconcerting persistency. Monriatine came to his assistance. "What do I hear? What test would you like to subject my friend to? What mountain peaks are you going to ask him to scale?"

"Oh, it isn't a question of perilous ascensions this time," replied the beauty. "We are not in Switzerland, now, but in Paris, a city where courage is exhibited by scouting prejudice and braving public opinion. You both entered my box in the middle of the performance. That is a fine example of it."

"One that cost me very little," exclaimed Mouriatine. "I am proud to show myself with you."

"You, my friend, are a bird of passage; you come to France to amuse yourself. You have left Russia, you are independent, and can do as you please. With Colonel Borisoff it is very different; and in his position it seems to me that credit is due to him for his bravery in showing himself with such a person as myself."

"Why do you speak in that way? Do you think I confound you with the irregulars who drive round the lake every day?"

"No; nor do you take me for a member of the fashionable world, and you are right. I was born in it, and I might perhaps return to it if I chose, for I am free, and what is still better, I am well-off; but I left it for choice, and my present life suits me perfectly. You met me last summer among the lakes and glaciers with a nobleman whom I dismissed when the whim seized me; and, now, after spending a fortnight at Monte Carlo, I return to Paris without knowing whether I shall remain there all the winter or leave again to-morrow."

"Your life is delightful. 'Nothing settled, caprice always,' is one of our Russian mottoes."

"Let me hear your friend's opinion," said Madame de Garches, gazing intently at the colonel.

"I agree with my countryman," said the colonel, who could be silent no longer. "Enjoyment is the main thing after all, and I, too, am free to choose my associates."

"Really? but I thought that you had been entrusted with a secret mission by your government; at least the general, by whom I was nearly bored to death, so assured me. Don't ask me his name; I have no desire to recall it."

"You certainly recollect what he told you about me?"

"Oh, perfectly; and if we spoke about you, it is because we are neighbours, you and I, in Paris, for I reside very near the Rue de Vigny."

"What! you know where I live?"

"Yes, indeed. In going to the Bois, I had often passed your house, and I had occasionally seen you driving a very stylish phaeton. Being naturally inquisitive, I inquired of the general about you, and learned that you were a very wealthy and agreeable Russian nobleman."

"That was very kind on the part of my illustrious countryman."

"No doubt; but he concluded by informing me that you belonged to the government police."

"In jest, I suppose," murmured the colonel, a trifle disconcerted by this brusque revelation.

"A very stupid joke, upon my word," seconded Monriatine. "Did he also accuse me of belonging to the secret service?"

"No," replied Madame de Garches, rather disdainfully; "but I assure

you he was not jesting at all. He explained the colonel's mission to me, and entered into particulars on the subject."

"So I have a mission?" inquired Borisoff, forcing a smile. "I am delighted to know it. It has greatly increased my importance in my own eyes."

"It seems you are deputised to watch the Nihilists."

"Then I must have failed lamentably in my mission, for they have been creating a great commotion of late."

"In Russia; but you only have to deal with those who are located in France; at least that was what the general pretended."

"I am sorry you did not tell me this when I was in Switzerland," exclaimed Mouriatine. "I might have had a great deal of fun at the expense of your informant."

"Then you don't believe it?" inquired Madame de Garches, naïvely.

"I think my friend Borisoff is really fulfilling a mission in Paris—a mission which he has taken upon himself, and which is by no means a difficult one. He has a large income, which he devotes to the study of pretty women, and I even flatter myself that he does not think me unworthy of helping him in his researches."

"If I were only certain you were speaking the truth," murmured the brunette. "But it is your friend's place to protest, and it is you who are doing all the talking."

"Protest!" exclaimed Borisoff, who had regained his calmness, "I shall do nothing of the kind. I wish you would take me for the great Chief of Police of all the Russias, so that I might show you that my greatness would not prevent me from following you, wherever you chose to lead me."

"Well and good! that's language I can understand, and you do not know how much pleasure it gives me. For I believe you, my dear colonel. You are no political agent. The general was an idiot—not altogether an idiot, perhaps—for he had his reasons for slandering you. He knew that I had noticed you, and he felt jealous. Now, however, that I know what to believe, I am going to take advantage of the chance that has brought you and your friend here. I shall probably remain in Paris only for a few days, and I wish to make my stay as pleasant as possible. I have but few acquaintances, and should be only too glad to spend my time in pleasant company."

"It is the same with us!" exclaimed Mouriatine.

"Then we can make up our minds to amuse ourselves during my stay; though I confess, if the colonel had been the dread representative of a formidable police force, I should, greatly to my regret, have been obliged to decline receiving him."

"But you would have had nothing to fear from him, as you don't conspire against our government."

"How do you know?" asked Madame de Garches, with a smile that would have melted all the glaciers of Mont Blanc.

"With eyes like yours a woman doesn't conspire; she loves."

"You are right. Love is better than politics, and I care very little about overthrowing governments. But I can't help pitying the exiled and proscribed, and I would not live on friendly terms with those who persecute them."

"If you only knew the people that you pity——"

"I do know them, or, to speak more accurately, I have met some of them."

"Where? In Switzerland?" inquired Mouriatine.

"Both in Switzerland and Paris," responded Madame de Garches, quietly.

The two Russians exchanged a furtive glance, and Mouriatine exclaimed: "What! in Paris, too? I thought these folks had established their headquarters at Geneva?"

"I thought so, too; but last year I met a lady here who was certainly working for the Nihilists."

"Did she make you her confidante?" inquired Borisoff, doubtfully.

"No; I owed the discovery of this secret, which I made no attempt to discover, entirely to chance; and I have intentionally forgotten it. Let us choose a more agreeable subject."

"With all my heart," responded Mouriatine; "but it would be as well for us to lower our voices a little. The people in the neighbouring boxes are complaining of us."

"You are right," said the brunette. "We are scandalising our neighbours, and, besides, we are not listening to a note of Meyerbeer's music. This is a positive sacrilege." And with these words she turned towards the stage.

The conversation had so far not fulfilled the expectations of the two gentlemen, but there was reason to hope for success. The woman evidently knew a great deal about the Nihilists, and the question was how to induce her to talk. Borisoff, who had a keen eye for feminine charms, considered her most bewitching. He was no doubt devoted to the government he served, but he had not lost his taste for romantic adventures by any means. To please an adorable creature, and profit by this conquest to regain the confidence of his superiors, what a blissful prospect! All the difficulties were not overcome by any means, still Ivan Ivanowitch, who had no fears, encouraged him by look and gesture, while Madame de Garches was apparently absorbed in a musical reverie. It is true that Ivan was not aware that Maxime Dorgères was prowling about the corridor, having decided to leave his hiding-place in order to watch these suspicious characters more closely. If either the lady or the gentlemen had suspected his close proximity it is probable they would have changed their tactics, for they all of them had particular cause to dread his interference.

Mouriatine, who had forgotten all about him, asked himself how he could prompt the renewal of an interesting conversation, while the colonel sat lost in admiration of the Grecian profile and clear olive complexion of Madame de Garches. Suddenly she changed her position, and confronted her admirer. "Do you know what I am thinking of?" she asked, abruptly.

"No; but I know what I think of you," replied Borisoff.

"I am thinking of the dramatic scene in the fourth act of this opera of 'The Huguenots,' and saying to myself that it is sometimes enacted under a different form in real life."

"Hum!" sneered Mouriatine; "human passions have calmed down considerably since Saint Bartholomew's day."

"Do you think so? Well, I myself think there has been little change. Combine love and politics, and a tragedy as exciting as 'The Huguenots' will be the result. Suppose, for instance, that one of the feminine Nihilists of your country was in love with an officer—one of the Czar's aides-de-camp, if you like. She knows a conspiracy is in progress—say, that the

palace is mined and about to be blown up. Her lover is ordered there on duty. He is with her, but about to depart. She detains him : he questions her. Then comes the alternative of allowing him to perish, or betraying the secret of the conspirators."

"That would, indeed, remind one of the famous fourth act," said the colonel, smiling. "But allow me to say that your idea of these Nihilists in petticoats is far too poetical. They would sacrifice every sentiment in the world to their pleasure or interest. You don't know, perhaps, that they have descended to theft? Yes; half-a-dozen pretty young women of respectable position plotted last summer to rob a bank at Kherson. Their masculine friends dug a subterranean passage to reach the vaults of the bank, and carried off four or five million roubles. However, all these rogues of both sexes will end their days in Siberia, and the men are no more like Raoul than the women are like Valentine."

"It is true that they sometimes steal," murmured Madame de Garches, abstractedly, "but only to sustain their cause. At least, one of them told me so."

"Had she a lover?"

"Yes; and I am inclined to think something very like the great scene of 'The Huguenots' was enacted between them."

"Indeed! If you would be kind enough to relate the story, I should be delighted to know that I have slandered these people by declaring them incapable of elevated sentiments."

"Oh, the situation, I believe, was not at all like that in the opera. The lover was not obliged to choose between his life and his love. He was not a conspirator, nor had his brothers been massacred; but his mistress exacted the sacrifice of his honour, and he yielded."

"In other words, he committed a theft to please her."

"That's about it; and the poor fellow has been severely punished. He was obliged to fly, or at least he has disappeared, and the lady troubles herself no further about him."

"Was he a Russian?" inquired Mouriatine, carelessly.

"No, a Frenchman. But I am not very well acquainted with the end of the story. I left Paris before the finish."

"There is nothing to prevent you from making inquiries about it, now that you have returned."

"Oh, the lady has probably left France, and any inquiries would be useless. Besides, the adventure saddened me a little, and I have returned to Paris to enjoy myself. I should like to lead a 'bachelor life' for a few days: eat suppers and attend public balls. You laugh; but I really mean what I say."

"Would you like two devoted cavaliers to accompany you?"

"You and your friend, you mean, I suppose?"

"Precisely; I assure you it would be impossible for you to do better. We, too, are in pursuit of amusement, and will act as your escorts with pleasure. When shall we begin?—this evening?"

"There is no masked ball anywhere this evening."

"Still, a supper is always possible," said the colonel; "and if it would please you to sup at that house in the Rue de Vigny, which you noticed——"

"Thanks; I only sup at a restaurant, or at home."

"At home? I thought you were here only temporarily?"

"True; but I always have a furnished house in Paris, just the same as

if I lived here from one end of the year to the other. It isn't far from yours, as it is in the Rue Jouffroy, between the Boulevard Maeshherbes and the Avenue de Villiers. Of course, it won't compare with yours in the Rue de Vigny, but it answers my purpose very well, as I am alone."

"And the general?" inquired Mouriatine, laughing.

"The general has never set foot there, thank heaven. I tolerated him as a travelling companion, but I could never have endured him in Paris."

"And you have accepted no successor?"

"Not I. I have asserted my independence, and will tolerate no other master, even for a time. I live alone, I repeat; and if you doubt it, I invite you to take supper with me this evening."

"Do you know that I feel a great desire to accept," said the colonel, laughing.

"If you refuse, you will greatly offend me. I shall think you are afraid of being badly treated by my cook. But she understands her business perfectly, and the repast I offer you will not be an impromptu affair. I am expected every evening, and the table is always well provided. I have already told you I am well off, and I might add that I am a terrible gourmand."

"Then you are perfect," exclaimed Mouriatine, "and I am your sincere admirer. A pretty woman who loves a good table is such a rarity."

"I shall excite your enthusiasm then, for I also have a first-rate wine cellar, so I hope you will not hesitate to come and try my wines?"

Borisoff did not speak, though his companion glanced at him inquiringly. He asked nothing better than to sup with this incomparable brunette, but would have preferred to do so at his own house.

"Very well," she remarked, after a short pause; "I see my proposal doesn't please you, so we will say no more about it."

"On the contrary, we *will* speak of it," replied Mouriatine, "for I accept your invitation with the greatest pleasure."

"Your friend is not of the same mind, and really I cannot blame him for his reserve. He scarcely knows me, and in these days of Nihilism it is as well to be prudent."

"But what possible connection can there be between Nihilism and the pleasant party you propose?"

"How do you know that I am not a member of the society? Didn't I tell you just now that I was acquainted with a lady who belonged to it, and haven't I also admitted that I am interested in a young man whom she had made her accomplice? From this to conspiring with these people there is only a single step."

"Do you mean that if we went to finish the evening at your house we should fall into a den of revolutionary bandits?" asked Mouriatine, with a hearty laugh. "Why don't you also try to convince us that you would treat us as Lucrezia Borgia treated her guests?"

"Nihilists in petticoats are capable of anything, the colonel said just now," retorted Madame de Garches, gaily, "even of regaling their enemies with poisoned wines."

"My dear madame," began Borisoff, who had just decided upon his plan of action, "you are attributing thoughts to me which have never entered my brain. I am only too delighted to follow you anywhere, and for the pleasure of supping with you, no matter where, I would willingly sit down with all the conspirators in the universe, even had they committed the blackest crimes."

"Very well!" exclaimed the lady. "I take you at your word."

"It is I who take you at yours. And to prove that I have no fears, I declare you would put the finishing touch to my delight by inviting your thief and her young associate to sup with us."

"I restore you to favour, then; and if I knew where to find the persons you speak of, I would certainly ask them to join us, for they are very good company, and we should have a charming party; but unfortunately they have fled, I know not where. The lady has, perhaps, fallen into the hands of the Russian police, and been sent to St. Petersburg, and her lover has probably crossed the seas, unless he has blown his brains out, so we must dispense with their company and sup without them."

"You will think me very impertinent," exclaimed Ivan Ivanowitch, "but I cannot refrain from saying that I accept your invitation all the more readily as I am dying of hunger. I arrived in Paris this evening at five o'clock, and had barely time to dress and look up my friend Borisoff before coming here, and we had so many things to talk about that we quite forgot our dinner."

"To come to the opera? How devoted you must be to music!"

"I must tell you that I had telegraphed for two reserved seats, and I was sure that my faithful Borisoff would keep me company; but I did not suspect that the train would be two hours behind time. We only came here to meet some old friends, who, by the way, have not appeared, and after listening to an act or two, we meant to repair to some restaurant."

"I understand, and it would be a poor reward for your frankness if I condemned you to endure the pangs of hunger until midnight. We will sup whenever you please, gentlemen. This act is about to end; we can leave directly afterwards."

"You are as good as you are beautiful! I return thanks on behalf of our grateful stomachs. But we had better not go to your house, I think. Your servants will not expect you so early."

"My servants are always expecting me. I sent away my brougham, it is true."

"And I gave no orders to my coachman," said Borisoff.

"Oh, well, we can find a cab that will take us to the Rue Jouffroy in twenty minutes, and ten minutes afterwards you shall take your seats at the table, my famishing friends."

"Adopted unanimously," exclaimed Mouriatine, gleefully.

The colonel was no longer inclined to offer any opposition. He even approved of the invention of this story of the neglected dinner, for he wished to lose no time in entering this strange woman's house. Madame de Garches had again turned to the stage, and seemed to be listening attentively to the concluding airs of the scene, which was rapidly drawing to a close; but suddenly she caught up her lorgnette, and directed it towards one of the side boxes. Two ladies occupied the front of this box, and behind them sat a gentleman, who could be only indistinctly seen. "It is strange," murmured Madame de Garches. "I could swear it was he."

"Who? Your general of last summer?" inquired Mouriatine, jestingly.

"I seldom think of him; but I fancy I recognise a gentleman whom I little expected to see this evening at the opera."

"Your Nihilist lover, perhaps," continued Mouriatine, in the same bantering tone.

"What does that matter to you?" replied the brunette, without relaxing her scrutiny.

"It does not concern me, that is a fact; but I have a right to examine the ladies who are with him. As for the gentleman who interests you so much, one can see merely the end of his moustache, which is scarcely enough to identify him. And, dear me, the women are neither young nor pretty!"

"I know them," said Borisoff. "They are two very rich and vulgar widows, who have taken a box for the season, in the hope of being seen and married by some ruined prince or nobleman."

"Then they are not Nihilists at all," sighed Mouriatine, to continue his jest.

"The resemblance is very strange," said the brunette; "but if it were really he, it would be stranger still."

"The young fellow would surely feel flattered if he knew you were taking so much trouble to get a look at him, and I think he would lose no time in showing himself."

"I doubt it."

"Then he has some reason for concealing himself from you, I suppose."

"You are too inquisitive, my friend."

"I admit it, and will say no more."

"You would do me a much greater favour by waiting until the gentleman leans towards the front of the box, and then telling me if you have ever seen him before."

"I visit Paris too rarely to recognise the frequenters of the opera. You would do better to ask the colonel."

"Yes, perhaps so; perhaps Monsieur Borisoff may have met the young man whom I think I recognise. His name is Monsieur de Carnoël."

On hearing this name the colonel could not repress a start, and Mouriatine, who seemed to be almost equally surprised, began to twirl his moustache to hide his embarrassment. And yet it was necessary to make some response; either to say: "I am not acquainted with any young man of this name," or the contrary. Borisoff's professional instinct suggested the thought that it would be better not to destroy all possibility of a subsequent explanation by a denial, and so he asked: "Isn't Monsieur de Carnoël the son of a French diplomatist?"

"Yes, I believe so. Have you ever met him, then?"

"Often enough to recognise him if I saw him."

"And do you think he would attend the opera with the two ladies in that box?"

"There would be nothing very astonishing about that. Monsieur de Carnoël has no fortune, I believe, and is probably desirous of contracting a wealthy marriage."

"He marry one of those rich *parvenues*? I can't believe him capable of such an act. It isn't, it cannot be he."

"Why, pray?" inquired the colonel, with an air of astonishment.

"Because he can't possibly be in Paris," replied the brunette, laconically.

"One might imagine that the gentleman was obliged to conceal himself," said Mouriatine, smiling. "Has he committed any crime? Was he the young man who allowed himself to be seduced by that feminine Nihilist of your acquaintance?"

"Madame," interposed Borisoff, who began to see his way a little more clearly, "I feel certain that Monsieur de Carnoël has not left Paris, at least unless he did so this morning, for I saw him only yesterday, and

talked with him." By making this bold announcement, the colonel had burned his ships behind him; but he did so without hesitation, for it was becoming more and more evident that Madame de Garches knew a great deal about his prisoner, and that the most effectual means of making her reveal what she knew was to pretend to be one of the young man's friends.

"You talked with him!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, I met him in the street, and spoke to him."

"Didn't he try to avoid you?"

"Not in the least. We are not intimate, by any means, but we have always been on very good terms, so why should he try to avoid me?"

"I thought he might have reasons for wishing to shun his former acquaintances, but I am delighted to learn that I am mistaken. Did he make any allusion to his present circumstances?"

"Yes, but with a good deal of reserve. He told me, however, that he had given up his situation—in a banking-house, if I remember rightly—and was about to start for America. I offered him a letter of introduction to our Consul-General at New York. And this reminds me that I have not yet sent him this letter which he thanked me for. I will repair my negligence to-morrow."

"It is very extraordinary," murmured Madame de Garches, still gazing at the box occupied by the marriageable widows. And then suddenly laying down her glass, she said aloud: "I was sure of it. It isn't he. The young man has just risen, and doesn't resemble Monsieur de Carnoël in the least."

"This Monsieur de Carnoël is very fortunate," sneered Mouriatine. "He seems to engross all your thoughts. May I ask when and how he succeeded in winning your affections?"

"Your question is impertinent, my dear sir," replied the brunette, with flashing eyes, "No one has gained my affections. If I evince an interest in this young man, it is only because one of my particular friends, residing in Florence, recently requested me to ascertain what had become of him, and in case I found him to deliver him a casket I have been entrusted with."

Borisoff started. "Madame," said he, "it will give me great pleasure to forward that box to Monsieur de Carnoël, who gave me his address so that I might send him the letter of introduction. If you like, my valet can take the casket at the same time."

"Thank you, but I promised to deliver it in person. I confess that the situation is rather embarrassing, for I can scarcely go to Monsieur de Carnoël; but I will write to him, and I suppose he won't refuse to call at my house."

"Certainly not. Still, it would not be advisable to wait too long, for he may leave at any moment. From what he said to me, I should not be surprised if he left Paris to-morrow evening."

"Yes, he must, indeed, be anxious to get away," murmured Madame de Garches, as if talking to herself. "What am I to do, then?"

"Are you really so anxious to see Monsieur de Carnoël that you would receive him this evening?" inquired Borisoff, after a short pause.

"Why not? My interview with him would not be protracted, and need not interfere with our supper."

"Very well; I can call at his lodgings, and if I find him in, as is probable, I will bring him to you. If he is not there, I will leave my card, with a line to say I am waiting for him in the Rue Jouffroy. He will

suppose I wish to see him respecting the letter he desired, and will certainly come."

"If you would do that, colonel, I should consider you the most amiable of men."

"That is a compliment I will try to deserve. Permit me to leave you for an instant. We must secure a vehicle, so that you may not have to wait in the vestibule, and the sooner we reach your house the sooner I can start in pursuit of Monsieur de Carnoël."

"Admirable! I will be ready when you return. Have the goodness to tell the box opener to bring me my wrappings."

The two Russians hastened from the box without noticing Maxime, who was at the end of the passage, and saw them very plainly. "Well, wasn't I right in advising you to make the lady's acquaintance?" said Mouriatine to his companion. "It is evident that she knows the thief, and if you continue to manœuvre skilfully we shall have the whole band in our clutches. I understand your scheme of bringing Carnoël into this crafty jade's presence. It is a bold stroke, but a masterly one."

"Still, it is one I might lose by if I did not take proper precautions," replied Borisoff. "I must first see the house we are going to, and find out how it is guarded. If I suspect any trap, I shall only pretend to fetch Carnoël, and shall return and tell her that I did not succeed in finding him. That will end the matter for to-night, and afterwards I will resort to other expedients. If, on the contrary, I find there is no danger, I will go home and bring Carnoël back with me in a closed carriage, with three stalwart men who are devoted to me. I will drive myself; Carnoël won't know where he is going, and whether he knows the house in the Rue Jouffroy or not, he will certainly make no objection to entering it. You will receive him. He won't distrust you, for he has never seen you, and you will conduct him to the mistress of the house. That will be the psychological moment. At a glance we shall be able to discover if there has ever been any complicity between them. All my servants will be in readiness: my three old soldiers will enter with me; three men will guard the outer door; we will search the house from garret to cellar, and I hope we shall make some important discoveries."

"It is by no means unlikely that we shall find your casket, and as for this pretended Madame de Garches——"

"We will take her to my house with Carnoël, her cook, and chamber-maid, and the men servants, if there are any. We can empty the house in a few trips, and we will afterwards decide what shall be done with our prisoners."

"It is a very bold move; but if the operation is skilfully conducted it will succeed. I understand now why this woman referred to Carnoël. She really does not know what has become of him, and does not imagine you suspect he had anything to do with the theft. Luck is evidently on our side; let us profit by it."

"Come, let us look for a cab at once; we haven't a moment to lose," rejoined the colonel, pushing Mouriatine towards the grand staircase.

XV.

MAXIME, firm in his resolve not to follow the two foreigners, did not emerge from his hiding-place when they passed, for he intended waiting for the

brunette, and meant to follow her as closely as he could without attracting her attention. As for Borisoff and his companion, he was convinced that they would not return again, and so he was not a little surprised to see them re-appear after a few moments and proceed directly to the box occupied by Madame Sergent.

He had previously noticed that one of the box-keepers had taken her a superb fur cloak and a hood, bordered with swan's down, that awakened anything but pleasant recollections, for the brunette had worn them both on the evening of the supper at Brebant's. She was evidently beginning her preparations for departure, and he might expect to see her emerge at any moment; but he had not foreseen that the two gentlemen would return for her. At last the door opened, and the brunette appeared upon the threshold, and proceeded towards the staircase, escorted on either hand by the two gentlemen, whom Maxime was mentally consigning to the infernal regions.

"They are going home with her," he muttered; "this is the climax. There is some mystery about the intimacy of these three creatures, who certainly ought to have no connection with each other. Zounds! I will discover the meaning of all this, even if I have to follow them about all night."

He followed the ill-assorted trio to the peristyle, where, taking good care to conceal himself behind a group of gentlemen, he perceived Borisoff leave his companions, open one of the outer doors, and beckon to somebody. Maxime instantly realised that the colonel was beckoning to the driver of a vehicle, and knew that he had not a second to lose if he was to follow the party. It was necessary to procure some means of transport at any price, and fortunately, just as he stepped outside with this object in view, an open victoria drove rapidly by. Maxime would have much preferred a close vehicle, but there was no choice, and he sprang into the victoria, with a few potent words to the driver. The latter was a quick-witted fellow, and he instantly drew up against the sidewalk of the Rue Halévy, and waited for further orders.

Soon the brunette and her attendants emerged from the opera house and entered a landau, which started off in the direction of the Chaussée d'Antin. It was easy enough to follow them, as the peaceable animals drawing their vehicle proceeded at a very leisurely pace. On reaching the church of the Trinity, the landau turned to the left, and proceeded along the Boulevard Haussmann towards the Boulevard Malesherbes. The victoria followed without the slightest difficulty. The driver was an old hand at the business. He had often aided a fare in watching a woman, and he knew that such expeditions are always exceedingly profitable, at least to the cabman. Meanwhile, the landau continued to move on towards the fortifications. "Can it be they intend to leave Paris?" said Maxime to himself; for it did not occur to him that Madame Sergent was imitating the manœuvre of the hare, which returns home after going a long way in the opposite direction, and so he could scarcely believe his eyes when he saw the landau stop in the same street to which he had escorted the brunette one lovely November night, and before the same house which had been deserted six weeks previously by its strange tenants.

"Shall I stop, sir?" inquired the shrewd cabman. "They are getting out—the two gentlemen, and now the lady. They don't intend going any further, for they are paying the driver."

"Go on," replied Maxime, "only take the opposite side of the street, and trot your horse."

This was really a clever manœuvre, as it enabled Maxime to advance without losing sight of the persons he was following, and without attracting their attention. It succeeded, too, beyond his hopes, for just as he reached the brow of the hill, the brunette and her companions entered the house after dismissing their vehicle. The victoria continued on its course, but as soon as it passed the corner of the street in which the trio had stopped, Maxime rose, placed his hand on the driver's shoulder, and said in a low tone: "Quick, turn to the right—stop near the alley there, and don't move until I return. Here are twenty francs on account—it is possible I may keep you all night."

"All right! I understand," replied the wily coachman. "You are following up the lady. Have no fears; I had just left the stable when you engaged me; my horse will keep fresh until morning; and if you need any assistance just call on me."

"Very well," answered Maxime, as he alighted; and then he added to himself: "I can't do better than consult my old friend Bidard, the porter in the house opposite. He must have a pretty distinct recollection of me, for I gave him twenty francs each time I talked with him, and to-night I will gladly give him forty if he consents to serve me. He must tell me what has occurred in the house since I was here. He can tell me whether it has been let to any one else, or whether the Carpathian bear has reappeared. I even think he will allow me the use of his lodge as a place of concealment and observatory from which I may watch these people. Heaven grant that he has not gone to bed!" And Maxime glanced at his watch and saw that it was only half-past ten.

"No," he resumed, "all his tenants cannot have returned yet. I shall find him up, but I have no time to lose."

Maxime reached the house of his friend the porter without meeting any one. From this well-chosen position he had a full view of the mysterious tenement, and could see that no lights were visible in the windows. Everything was as dark as on the night when he had escorted the so-called Madame Sergeant home from the rink. Evidently the reception-room did not overlook the street. On the other hand, he saw with no little satisfaction that the light of a modest lamp was shining through a window in the ground floor of the house guarded by the friendly porter. This curtailless window must be that of his room, and Maxime did not hesitate to look in, so as to see what was going on inside. The porter sat by the table reading an evening paper, for which one of the tenants was, no doubt, impatiently waiting. His only companions were a big cat and a moulting parrot. The man was evidently a bachelor. This delighted Maxime, for the presence of a woman would have increased the difficulties he had to contend with. He at once tapped on the glass, whereupon the porter turned his head, and seeing a human form outside, rose to open the window.

"Don't be afraid," said Maxime in a low tone. "You know me. I am the person to whom you gave some information about the Prussian opposite."

"What, is it you, sir, at this hour?"

"Yes. I have come to ask you to do me a service. Will you let me in at once?"

"With pleasure; and you shall remain as long as you like."

"That is the very thing I was about to ask. I should, perhaps, like to make use of your lodge for an hour or two." And as the porter appeared

a little surprised, Maxime hastily added ; " There is something new going on over there. But don't leave me in the street any longer. I don't want any one in the house opposite to see me."

" I am coming, sir, I am coming," said Bidard the porter. And after closing the window and drawing the cord he hastened to the door to receive his visitor in person.

" Quick," said Maxime, gliding into the passage. " Put out the light, pray, or hide it in a corner, and to repay you for any inconvenience it may cause you, take these forty francs, my good fellow."

Bidard pocketed the money and placed the lamp under the table, murmuring : " Thank you all the same, sir, but I assure you that what I do is not from interest alone."

" I'm sure of that. Now stand on guard with me at your window and let us talk."

The porter hastened to obey a gentleman who gave such princely gratuities, and whose conduct was as mysterious as that of some hero of romance.

" When did these people return ?" inquired Maxime.

" Return ! why, nothing has been heard of them, and it isn't likely that anything ever will be. Monsieur knows that the Prussian left six weeks ago."

" You are mistaken ; he has just returned."

" Impossible, sir ; no one has seen him."

" Then he must have returned at night. At least, the house is occupied now, by him or some other person."

" By the rats and mice, then. The whole house is closed, as monsieur can see, and no one has lived in it since the Prussian decamped. I spend half my time on the doorstep since the weather became fine, and have never seen any one opposite. It's true there are some who say that the house is haunted, but I don't believe any such nonsense."

" There are two men and a woman there at this very moment. I saw them go in."

" And is the Prussian one of them ?"

" No ; the gentlemen are foreigners with whom I am acquainted, and the woman is the very person I escorted to the house the evening before I first came to you for information ; and at that time I told you the name she had given me—Madame Sergent."

" Oh, yes, I recollect ; monsieur thought she was on the town. And is monsieur sure she is with the gentlemen ?"

" I am positive of it."

" Then the place is a regular night house !" exclaimed the porter, " and all sorts of horrible things must be going on there. Hadn't I better go for the police ?"

" No. I have reasons for wishing to avoid any appeal to them. Besides, what grounds of complaint have I ? This woman must have a right to enter the house, as she carries the key of it in her pocket, and to invite any one she chooses to accompany her. I only want to find out what these people mean to do, and whether they go away or remain. It was to watch their manœuvres that I asked for a seat here."

" Monsieur can make himself at home. Nothing can escape his notice here."

" One question, first of all : has the house opposite any other mode of egress ?"

"Not that I am aware of. There is a garden at the back, but when the house was searched I followed the inspector in, and there is no gate on the other side."

"How is the interior arranged?"

"On the side of the street there is a dining-room and billiard-room on the ground-floor; on the floor above, a large drawing room; and over that, two sleeping apartments. On the garden side there is a small reception-room on the first floor; in the basement——"

"Look!" interrupted Maxime, "there is a light on the first floor."

"That is true," muttered the porter. "They are lighting up the large drawing-room. Two lamps and any number of candles. And there must be a lot of people inside. See how they are lighting it up everywhere, quicker than the Champs Elysées on illumination days. Look, it's the dining-room's turn now, one chandelier, two chandeliers—— Ah ha, the woman must intend to give a ball and a supper! And where have all the lackeys sprung from? There must be at least three or four of them. See them pass in front of the windows. Upon my word, if a fellow was inclined to be superstitious, one might believe the devil was going to give a *fête* there, for never since the house was built has any one seen so much as a candle burning in it."

"And still you assure me that no one has been seen entering it for several days past."

"Not even a cat. Monsieur may ask any of the people living here. If they hadn't already gone to bed, they would all be at the windows looking out, and cause such a commotion that a crowd would assemble in the street."

"Yes, it's wonderful," muttered Maxime. "Evidently a number of servants have been brought here during the night, to prepare everything for the reception of the owners and their guests. Who has done this? And with what object?"

"I think, sir, that the woman has brought the two foreigners home with her to spend the night in play and secure their money."

"I don't think gambling has anything to do with it. But I should like to understand what is going on. When I arrived there was no light, and yet the lady and her companions had just entered. Didn't you tell me there was a small room overlooking the garden?"

"Not so very small, and very richly furnished. It looked to me like a lady's boudoir."

"That explains it. She took the two gentlemen there at once, and gave orders that the reception-rooms should be prepared."

"Yes; they are no doubt going to sup. But where did any suitable provisions come from?"

"You are sure there is no back door to the house?"

"Sure; but there may be some underground passage leading no one knows where. The Prussian might easily have made one while he was living there."

"I don't think subterranean passages very probable, especially in this part of Paris; but they might get over the garden wall. But look! do you see those three shadows against the curtains of the drawing-room?"

"Certainly I see them," muttered the porter; "two tall ones and a shorter one—the lady and the two gentlemen. Perhaps supper isn't ready, or they are expecting some one. They don't seem to be going down to the dining-room. Why, they are bowing to each other. Look, the

tallest one bows and the lady gives him her hand, and the one who bowed has gone out; one can see only two shadows now. Where can the other one be going?"

Five minutes passed without further incident. Two floors of the mysterious house were still brilliantly lighted, but the shadows had disappeared. Presently, however, the little door which Madame Sergent had used on the evening of her return from the skating-rink opened, and a man appeared upon the threshold, followed by a servant holding a candelabrum in his hand. In the bright light Maxime had no difficulty in recognising Borisoff, who held a short conference with the footman, which was intelligible enough, owing to the gestures employed. "He is telling him that he will return," thought Maxime, "and the servant explains that he has only to ring to be admitted."

The door closed, and Borisoff proceeded in the direction of the Boulevard Malesherbes; and now the fencing-master and the lady came to the window of the drawing-room. They were evidently waiting for the colonel's return.

"Listen," remarked Maxime to his ally, the porter, "I am going to follow that man to the end of the street and return."

"Very well; I will open the door and return to my post. Monsieur need only rap on the window when he comes back."

Bidard gently pulled the cord, and Maxime glided out. Borisoff was about fifteen feet in advance of him, and at the end of the Rue Joffroy another man, whom Maxime recognised as his driver, was pacing slowly to and fro. "Good!" he thought, "I can let my Russian go on. My cabby will be able to tell me what direction he takes." So he concealed himself in the shadow to watch for further incidents.

The colonel, who was walking very rapidly, soon reached the Boulevard Malesherbes, and on seeing the driver, went straight towards him. This surprised Maxime, who began to watch with all his eyes. He was too far off to hear what passed between them, but the conversation was so prolonged that it excited his anxiety. Finally, however, Borisoff passed on, and disappeared in the darkness. Maxime waited until he thought the Russian sufficiently in advance of him, and then he, in turn, approached the cabman, who had lighted his pipe and re-seated himself on his box. On seeing Maxime he began to laugh. "Ah, sir," he said, "the gentleman tried to pump me, but I outwitted him finely. Seeing my cab here, his suspicions were aroused, and he asked what I was doing. I saw through it in a minute, and told him I was waiting for a physician who hired me by the month, and who was visiting a patient at that big house there on the boulevard."

"That was a good idea. You have put him off the track, and I will remember it when we settle up. Did he ask you to take him anywhere?"

"Yes; he asked me at first to take him home—no distance at all, he said—offering me a five-franc piece."

"To the Rue de Vigny, I suppose?"

"Exactly, you seem to know where he puts up. I don't mean to boast, but if he had offered me a louis, I wouldn't have deserted you. Finally, seeing that it was no use, he started off. I would bet drinks that he has reached the Boulevard de Courcelles by this time."

"You have acted splendidly, my good fellow, and rely on me to reward you. That man is going to return, and as I wish to watch him, I am going to station myself lower down. Remain where you are, and keep

your eyes open. He will probably pass you again, and when I return you can tell me what you have seen. If I chance to need you, can I rely upon you?"

"Quite so; you have only to call, 'Auguste,' and I will come on the run, and if there is any fighting to be done, I will show you that I am equal to it."

Auguste was a stalwart fellow, and Maxime, who considered it by no means impossible that he might have some difficulty with Madame Sergent's cavaliers, was not inclined to refuse this offer of assistance, for Bidard would not prove a very valuable auxiliary under such circumstances. "Very well, I will call you," he responded. "Thank you, till by-and-bye."

Having thus arranged matters, Maxime hastened back to his place of ambush. The porter was awaiting him, and displayed great alacrity in opening the door, being anxious to learn the result of the sally. "The man went down the Boulevard Malesherbes, and I am satisfied that he intends to return," Maxime remarked in explanation.

"Yes, that is as clear as day. They won't sit down to table without him. They are evidently waiting for him."

"Silence," whispered Maxime, suddenly; "I see three men coming up the street. They are walking about five feet apart. And, look, they keep close in the shadow of the walls, and constantly stop to watch and listen. See, they have stationed themselves on either side of the door of the house opposite."

"Is there any danger of their seeing us?"

"No, for I have extinguished the light. Hark! can't you hear the sound of carriage wheels?"

"Yes, a vehicle is certainly driving up the Boulevard Malesherbes. See, it has turned into the street, and is coming nearer."

A moment later a large berline, drawn by two horses, drew up before Madame Sergent's house. A man alighted and rang at the little door, which was immediately opened, and a servant, probably the same who had accompanied Borisoff to the door, appeared upon the threshold. After a short colloquy the man retraced his steps, and having exchanged a few words with the driver, opened the door of the vehicle. Maxime could scarcely repress a cry of astonishment as he saw Robert de Carnoël alight and proceed towards the house, closely followed by two men. They did not hold him as policemen generally hold a prisoner; he even appeared to be talking with them, and it was evident that no compulsion whatever was employed. The little door had remained open, and the footman still stood there holding a light. He was evidently waiting for Carnoël to enter.

"Ah! sir," whispered Bidard, "I believe a crime is about to be committed. They have brought that young man here to put him out of the way, perhaps to strangle him. I have a great mind to call for help."

"Not yet," replied Maxime, quickly; "let us first see what they intend to do."

"Look at the drawing-room window, sir; see those two shadows on the curtains!"

"It is the lady and her friend—the one who stopped behind. They heard the carriage drive up, and have come to the window."

"I bet they won't open it. My lodgers on the third floor have opened theirs, and the brigands opposite won't care to show themselves. And see, the shadows have disappeared; it is the street we must watch."

Nothing at all extraordinary was occurring there, however. The carriage did not move; neither did the three men who had acted as scouts. They were so close to the wall that it was necessary to know they were there to be able to distinguish them. The coachman remained motionless on the box. Robert de Carnoël approached the little door, escorted by two well-dressed men, and followed by a third who had just alighted from the berline. Maxime's curiosity was excited to the highest pitch. Carnoël, falling, as it were, from heaven, into the midst of these people, was the strangest of the many strange incidents of the evening. Had he, indeed, been the colonel's prisoner, as Georget declared? and if so, why had the colonel decided to allow him to come to the residence of the so-called Madame Sergeant? Robert's re-appearance was a miracle to Maxime, who resolved not to lose sight of him again under any circumstances; and for the first time since his resumption of the campaign, he began to think he might find it necessary to call in auxiliaries. He did not wish to kill any one; but he was determined that those he was watching should explain their conduct. However, the moment for that had not yet come, and Maxime watched with all his eyes.

Just as M. Dorgères' former secretary reached the door, where the servant holding a light was awaiting him, a strange sound burst upon the stillness of the night—a sound that seemed to proceed from above. It was the crow of a cock, or rather an imitation—a resounding and ironical *cock-a-doodle-do!* that evidently came from a human throat. "Those clerks on my third floor must be at their windows," whispered the porter. "There is one very comical fellow. I have an idea we are going to see some fun."

Maxime felt no desire to laugh, and the people in the street seemed even less inclined for merriment. They all looked up to see who had uttered the mocking cry—all, even the coachman on the box of the berline. Whereupon the cock crowed a second time. Of all who heard this singular sound, the one who paid least heed to it was certainly Robert de Carnoël. He seemed to be in haste to enter, and the servant at the door stepped aside to let him pass. One of the three men who acted as his escort crossed the threshold almost simultaneously with him, and the other two were about to follow, when the footman asked them some question which made them pause for a moment. The coachman fastened the reins and sprang down from the box, handing his whip to one of the persons standing close to the wall. This man left his post and placed himself at the horses' heads. The coachman then turned, and Maxime, who had not previously seen his face, instantly recognised him. "It's Borisoff," he murmured. "But why is he driving his carriage himself? and why didn't he go inside with Carnoël?"

"Monsieur," whispered the porter, "look! the lights have all been extinguished in the drawing-room. A strange idea to put out the lights just as the guests begin to arrive." Maxime looked up and saw that the windows of the first floor, so bright only a moment before, had suddenly become dark. "Look," continued the porter, "those in the dining-room have also been extinguished. They must intend to spend the night playing hide-and-seek. It seems to astonish that man who has just got off the box. He looks up—now he steps back in order to see better. Yes, my fine chap, it is all dark up there. You will be obliged to go in without a light."

Borisoff, standing in the middle of the street, seemed to hesitate. He

turned and looked up, probably to see if the person who had imitated the cock crow was still at his window. He was silent for the moment. Did Borisoff see him? It is impossible to say, but he walked straight to the little door which was half closed and still guarded by two of his subordinates. They stepped aside to make room for him, but as he placed his hand on the door to push it wide open, it was violently closed by some one on the inside.

"Ah! that's good!" exclaimed Bidard. "They have just slammed the door in his face. What was he thinking of? Did he think he was invited with his master?"

"It's no coachman," murmured Maxime.

"I thought he was dressed very strangely for a coachman. But if he's a gentleman, why was he on the box? Oh, ho! how angry he is: he's beating and kicking the door with all his might. The others join him. If the door wasn't very strong they would break it in, but I defy them to do that. What a row they are making! They will wake up everybody in the neighbourhood."

"So much the better."

"I am surprised that the clerks have not shouted for the police before this time."

"Hush! the dining-room window opens; a man is standing there."

"It is one of the two men who entered just now. I recognise him by his square shoulders. The coachman approaches; they are going to hold a conference."

"I should like to hear what they are going to say. Open the window a little, very quietly."

The obliging Bidard cautiously did so. A very animated conversation was going on between the individual who had just appeared at the dining-room window and the colonel. Both were talking loud enough to be distinctly heard; but they were speaking in the Russian language. At the same time, however, they indulged in gesticulations which Maxime tried his best to understand. The question was evidently one of ascending or descending. The dining-room was on the first floor, an elevated first floor, it is true, but the window was not more than ten feet from the ground. An agile man could easily leap out, nor did it seem impossible to scale it.

The man leaned from the balcony, measuring the distance with his eye, and his master on the pavement below measured it as well. What did they intend to do, and what had become of Madame Sergent, the fencing-master, and M. de Carnoël? Meanwhile, the men who had been guarding the door, and those stationed against the wall, approached the colonel, forming a circle around him. The little band was evidently preparing for an assault, the more so as the man who held the horses now led them forward until the berline was directly under the window.

"Look, the simpleton who is shut up inside wants to get out, and his comrades are going to help him," said Bidard. "He will have no difficulty in jumping out upon the box. I think I had better shut the window now, as they have finished their conversation."

Maxime allowed him to do so, but almost immediately he cried—"You are mistaken. They intend to enter the house. Two of them are climbing upon the box; the carriage is to serve them as a ladder."

"They have plenty of assurance," said Bidard, angrily. "To force their way in through the windows is altogether too much. These men

must be robbers, and this must not be allowed to go on. I intend to give the alarm ; that is, if monsieur doesn't object."

"I object?" exclaimed Maxime, who thought the time for action had come; "I ask nothing better than to fall upon these scoundrels; and rather than allow them to escape, I will go myself and wake every one in the house."

He had scarcely ceased speaking, however, when another cock-crow rang out even more clearly than before, accompanied by the sound of a rattle. A falsetto voice cried: "Murder!" A bass voice roared: "Scaling a wall—night—occupied house—band of thieves—galleys for life!"

These words borrowed from the penal code produced a prodigious effect. The two men on the box were preparing to help each other up to the window where their companion was extending his arms to them; but this threat, uttered by an invisible witness of the scene, made them hesitate. At the same time, all the windows of the house in Bidard's charge were heard to open. "Every one is astir," he said, rubbing his hands—"the lady on the second floor, the retired druggist on the first. Those clerks have set them all agoing; and we shall have a perfect farce. The druggist raves like a madman, and the lady dreams of assassins every night. Listen, the play is beginning."

"A thousand thunder claps!" vociferated a masculine voice. "What's this? A crowd of bandits trying to break into the house opposite. Porter, porter, go for the police!"

"Fire! murder!" shrieked a woman.

"Wait a moment, you rascals," resumed the man. "My revolver! where is my revolver?"

Meanwhile Maxime never once lost sight of Borisoff, who evinced unmistakable signs of perplexity, and even of alarm. Evidently he was not prepared for this complication, and nothing remained for him but to beat a retreat. Nevertheless he still seemed to hesitate, and moved about, shaking his fist at the people who were snouting to him, gathering together his subordinates, and gesticulating wildly. In compliance, undoubtedly, with his orders, one of the men who had climbed on the box jumped down, and the other took the whip and reins. The man who had entered the house with Robert de Carnoël leaped from the balcony to the top of the berline and thence to the pavement. Just then there was a sharp report of a weapon fired by Bidard's first-floor tenant, whereupon Borisoff hustled his men into the carriage, and sprang in after them; and the man on the seat galloped the horses in the direction of the Avenue de Villiers.

"The cowards fly!" howled Bidard, quite willing to show himself as soon as the danger was over. "They shan't get away like that. Let us pursue them, monsieur. This is the very time to cry, 'Stop thief!' There is a station-house down the avenue; the policemen will stop the carriage!"

At the same time he rushed out into the street, and Maxime very willingly followed. He did not care much about the capture of Borisoff, for he knew where to find him at any time; but he was very anxious to discover what had become of Robert de Carnoël, Madame Sergent, and the fencing-master. They could not have made their escape; they must still be in the house, and he depended upon M. Bidard's tenants to assist in routing them out. Just as he stepped outside, the victoria dashed up.

Auguste, the faithful driver, attracted by the pistol-shot had hastened to the assistance of his fare.

"Bravo!" exclaimed Bidard, "we will jump in and pursue the brigands."

"If the brigands are in that berline that just dashed by," said the cabby, "it is of no use to start my mare after them. She is a good animal, but no match for ten-thousand franc horses. I bet those animals can make their fifteen miles an hour easily."

"You are right; it is useless to pursue them," replied Maxime. "Besides, we have more important business here."

"I heard a pistol-shot, citizen. Was it you who fired it?"

"No, and no one was injured. I am inclined to think it was fired in the air."

"Who dares to say that I fired in the air?" exclaimed a harsh voice. Maxime turned, and found himself face to face with a grotesque-looking personage; a short, fat, old man, enveloped in a dressing-gown, and armed with an old cavalry pistol, while his head was swathed in the folds of a large red silk handkerchief.

"Excuse me, sir," replied Maxime, "I thought you merely desired to give the alarm."

"No, sir. I fired at the leader of the brigands, and am sure I hit him. If I had not been short of cartridges, I should have killed them all. Unfortunately, I had but one load."

"Fortunately, Papa Pincornet," said a young man, who had just emerged from the house. "If you had fired others you might have done a great deal of mischief. I was at my window with my friend Galopardin, directly above you, and your ball whistled up just past our noses."

"You know that I have no desire to jest with you," replied the man in the dressing-gown, drily.

"Upon my word, I am thoroughly in earnest. Ask Galopardin if you like."

"Yes," said another young man, "I swear that what he says is true; I swear it by the head of the porter, and by this house."

All the tenants now began to appear upon the scene of action, and Maxime was not sorry to see them collected together, for he hoped to induce them to second him in his plans. "Gentlemen," he began, "I have not the honour of your acquaintance, and since chance has made me a witness of this strange scene——"

"Excuse me, sir, but who are you?" inquired the old druggist, pompously.

Maxime was intensely exasperated by this absurd person, who assumed the airs of a magistrate interrogating a prisoner; but he felt that he needed the good-will of every one, and so he did not disdain to try and conciliate M. Pincornet. "It is true that I am meddling a little with what does not concern me, since I am not an inmate of the house," he said, modestly. "But I happened to come in to ask some information of the porter, and was just going out again when the rascals who attempted to break into the house opposite arrived, some in the carriage and others on foot. Naturally, I remained to render some assistance to honest folks if possible. I am the nephew of Monsieur Claude Dorgères, banker, of the Rue de Suresnes."

"A good firm, sir," said the druggist; "a firm very favourably known in mercantile circles."

"Hold! I know your uncle's cashier," exclaimed one of the young tenants of the third floor.

"Indeed?" asked Maxime, a little surprised.

"I was even very intimate with him, before he rose so very high in the world. We fed at the same restaurant. His name is Jules Vignory, and I think Galopardin knows him, too."

"Yes, I know him," chimed in clerk number two. "Would you like a description of him? Jules Vignory, born at Vesoul, very virtuous, twenty-six years of age, chestnut hair, round chin, oval face——"

"I know the rest," interrupted Maxime, laughing. "Vignory is my intimate friend, and I am delighted to meet two of his comrades."

"Present me, Falot," said the clerk who had last spoken, "and I will introduce you afterwards."

"Agenor Galopardin, book-keeper, and member of the Society of the Children of Apollo," said Falot, in the most serious tone imaginable; "a light tenor voice. It was he who personated the cock just now."

"My compliments, sir," responded Maxime, as gravely. "You certainly possess unparalleled talent as an imitator of the chanticleer. But allow me to remind you that we have still a duty to fulfil—that of informing the inmates of this house which the scoundrels attempted to enter."

"It isn't worth the trouble. The cage is empty. The Prussian has gone back to his native land."

"His friends have returned, Monsieur Falot," said the porter. "A quarter of an hour ago a lady and two gentlemen were in the house, to say nothing of the servants."

"Bah!"

"It's a fact; and if you had not remained at the Café Cardinet so long you would have seen them go in, as well as we did—this gentleman and myself."

"And I, too," exclaimed the cabman. "I was some way off, but I have good eyes; and the husband offered me five francs to take him home. I would wager my right hand that he has murdered his wife."

"A murder! Oh, Heavens!" groaned the lady tenant of the second floor, Mademoiselle Saint Grès by name.

"'The Tragedy of the Jealous Husband.' You can buy it for a sou," sneered Galopardin.

"Well, it seems to me indispensable that one of us should go for the commissary of police," declared Pincornet.

"And while waiting for him, it would be as well for us to enter and examine the premises. If a crime has been committed, the victim is in need of help, perhaps," said Maxime, quickly.

"We can get in by the window," assented Falot. "Bidard must have a ladder."

"Gentlemen," began the ex-druggist, "allow me to remark——"

"Nothing at all," said Galopardin. "Keep your remarks until they are called for. Perhaps there is a corpse or two in there, and a search is allowable under such circumstances."

Maxime was quite of Galopardin's opinion; besides, he was anxious to dispense with the company of the police in his tour of inspection, and to find Robert de Carnoël at any cost; so he replied, "What we propose doing is not strictly lawful, perhaps, but I will assume all the responsibility of the proceeding."

"Well and good!" exclaimed Galopardin. "Falot and I will climb in with you; Bidard and Pincornet shall remain outside to guard the door, and Mademoiselle Saint Grès will pray for us."

This programme was announced in such a decided tone that no further objection was offered. The intrepid Falot led the way with Maxime and Galopardin, and succeeded in clambering upon the balcony without much difficulty. On entering the room Galopardin struck a match, and its uncertain light was sufficient to reveal a candelabrum filled with candles, so that the next moment the darkness gave place to a real illumination, and the invaders were able to examine the room they had entered. It was, as Bidard had said, the dining-room. In the centre of the round table stood a Dresden vase filled with rare flowers; but it did not appear that any of the guests had taken their seats there, and profound silence reigned around. The house seemed deserted. "They were about to sup," exclaimed Falot.

"Sup!" retorted Galopardin. "Upon what? There is plenty of china and cut-glass on the table, but not a single bottle of wine, and nothing but water in the decanters. The table has been spread for show. If they had really intended to sup we should detect the smell of truffles."

"But what surprises me even more is the profound silence," said Maxime. "There were several servants in the house, and I saw three or four persons enter it."

"One would think it was the castle of the Sleeping Beauty," murmured Falot.

"Bah! they can't all have flown. By searching we shall discover them somewhere."

"Let us do so at once," remarked Maxime, "but first, let us see where this door leads to. But, see, it is locked on the outside."

"Let us begin by calling," replied Falot, pounding upon the door with all his might, and shouting, "Hallo, there!"

Maxime could not repress a smile, though he was by no means in a laughing mood. There was no response to this call, however, but a sound of voices in the street attracted the attention of the three explorers. They hastened to the window and beheld the tenants and the porter engaged in an animated conversation with two policemen, who, having heard the pistol shot in the distance had come to learn the cause of the disturbance. Bidard had tried to explain, but Pincornet had interrupted him, and was now displaying his oratorical powers. Maxime decided that the moment for his interference had come, and in a few seconds he and the two clerks joined the group. He briefly related what had just occurred, suppressing the names of Robert de Carnoël and Colonel Borisoff, and telling his story in such a way as to make the policemen think that a crime had perhaps been committed, and that it was necessary to search the house.

All the doors being locked, the intervention of the commissary of police became necessary, as he alone had a right to open them, and so one of the policemen hastened in search of him. The commissary did not live far off, and as he had not gone to bed he speedily made his appearance, followed by a locksmith provided with all the implements of his craft. It was not the first time the magistrate had heard of this house in the Rue Jouffroy, and the singular habits of its inmate had more than once been described to him; so he listened attentively to Maxime's story, to the discourse of M. Pincornet, and especially to the report of M. Bidard, who,

in the capacity of porter of the house opposite, must know something of what had been going on in the mysterious tenement for several months. It was at least certain that a forcible attempt had just been made to enter the house by climbing in through a window, and so the commissary decided to examine this dwelling, whose occupants only appeared at intervals, and disappeared like phantoms as soon as one attempted to touch them. By his order one of the policemen rang several times, and there being no answer, the locksmith was told to open the door.

This was neither a long nor a difficult operation, and the explorers entered and found themselves at the foot of a staircase, which, like everything else, was shrouded in darkness. Bidard had foreseen this, and he promptly appeared armed with a lantern, which he handed to a policeman, for he was not desirous of being the first to explore this dangerous abode. The staircase led to a billiard-room, an apartment with three doors, including that opening upon the landing. One of the doors was locked, but the key had been left in the inside, and one had only to turn it to enter the dining-room, where the candles, lighted by Galopardin, were still burning. The third door led into a butler's pantry, containing a liberal supply of glass and plate. There was no sign of the recent presence of any persons here, but the commissary called attention to the fact that the window of the pantry was open—a window on a level with the floor, and through which one could step out on a small piazza. From this a short flight of steps led down to a garden, or rather courtyard, containing a miniature fountain. The policeman who carried the lantern stepped out and threw the light over the garden.

"I see a ladder standing there against the wall," exclaimed Maxime.

"They have made their escape, that's evident," remarked Bidard; "and as there is only some unoccupied ground on the other side of the wall until you reach the Rue Ampère, those folks are a long way off by this time."

A policeman climbed the ladder, and found that there was another on the opposite side of the wall. To climb up and descend in this way was an easy matter; and the precautions which had been taken proved that the inmates had anticipated the necessity of flight. The damp soil at the foot of the ladder retained the imprints of the feet that had passed that way, and among them Maxime perceived the marks of two tiny boot-heels, that indicated the passage of Madame Sergent. He refrained from announcing this discovery to the commissary, however, and kept his reflections to himself, though he fully realised the futility of any further search.

However, the entire house, as well as the adjoining ground, was subjected to a thorough examination; but nothing was found.

The commissary, who was rather disconcerted, had been obliged to content himself with taking the names of those present, as a precaution in case he found it necessary to summon them as witnesses, a scarcely probable contingency, for he was beginning to believe the whole affair a hoax.

Maxime was obliged to give his address, but he took good care not to tell what he knew, and made his escape in the victoria as speedily as possible. He did not forget, however, to reward Bidard generously for his trouble, and in taking leave of the two clerks he invited them to dine with him, an invitation which they accepted in unison.

XVI.

THE events of the Rue Jouffroy presented themselves under an entirely different aspect when Maxime awoke the next morning. He had scarcely closed his eyes all night, and he had had time to reflect, examine the facts, and deduce the logical conclusions of them. The belle of the skating rink was evidently no friend of Borisoff. On the contrary, she was the friend of Robert de Carnoël, and had robbed the colonel of his prisoner. Robert had entered the house under the escort of one of Borisoff's servants, and had escaped from it, thanks to her connivance, while the man charged with guarding him had been incarcerated by the wily brunette. Maxime understood what must have taken place. Robert and his attendant had been ushered into the dining-room. Robert had then been hastily pushed into an adjoining apartment, and the door quickly locked behind him, after which escape was an easy matter. But by what miracle of address had the brunette succeeded in deceiving Borisoff, and persuading him to bring his prisoner to the house where she had prepared her trap. And who was she, this Madame Sergent, who appeared only to disappear again, who skated at the rink like an adventuress, who sat enthroned like a lady of rank in one of the best boxes at the opera, who supped with an irregular like Berthe Verrier, who had a house full of liveried servants at her command, who appeared one evening with a counterfeit *boyard*, and who was escorted home a month afterwards by the most aristocratic of Russian colonels?

To Maxime's mind the pretended Madame Sergent could only be an agent of the conspirators who had stolen Borisoff's papers, an intimate friend of the thief who had left her hand in the claws of the safe with the famous bracelet so adroitly stolen from him at the restaurant Brébant. But if Madame Sergent were all this, what was to be thought of M. de Carnoël? The woman would not have taken so much trouble and incurred so much danger for one who was nothing to her. Robert de Carnoël was either her lover or her accomplice, and in either case Robert had deceived Alice, and was unworthy of her love. Robert had not only been rescued by this worthless woman, but he had fled with her. She had led him away, probably to conceal him in some more agreeable hiding place than Borisoff's house, for it was probable that she had several abodes, and that she would not again set foot in the little house in the Rue Jouffroy.

"So those who accused Carnoël were right," Maxime thought. "My uncle is right, and I have been acting as foolishly as Don Quixote when he undertook to rescue the scoundrels who were being taken to the galleys. How terribly my cousin was deceived in this young man! She was madly in love with him, and, I fear, unfortunately she is still so. But that I thought him slandered is too much! And when I think of all the efforts I have made to prove his innocence! Ah, I have been making a pretty fool of myself!"

And yet he could not forget that he had not been the only person to undertake the defence of his uncle's secretary. The Countess Yalta had stoutly declared that Robert was the victim of the grossest injustice. It was she who had awakened these doubts in the mind of Mademoiselle Dorgères, just as the poor child was beginning to believe that Robert was really guilty. It was she who had aroused Maxime, and enlisted him in

this absurd enterprise. But the nocturnal adventure in the Rue Joffroy proved that her compassion was misplaced ; and Maxime hoped to convert her to more rational views. He was also anxious to denounce the conduct of the fencing-master, who had been Madame Sergent's ally, and had certainly acted without the knowledge of the noble-hearted woman who employed him.

In his last interview with Madame Yalta, she had spoken very plainly on the subject of the Nihilists and their adherents. "I have the good fortune not to be a Russian subject," she had remarked, "so I have nothing to do with these people, and though I am by instinct the champion of the proscribed, I am not the champion of murderers."

There could be nothing in common between the countess and a vile adventuress ; but it was not so surprising that a hireling should betray his mistress, and perhaps Madame Yalta might be surrounded, without knowing it, by scoundrels connected with the society whose aim is universal destruction. If Kardiki was one of them, as everything seemed to indicate, he had chosen his post very wisely. The mansion in the Avenue de Friedland was an asylum where no one would think of looking for a socialist and conspirator ; and Maxime decided that he had only to reveal the scoundrel's conduct to the countess to ensure his dismissal. So the young fellow made haste to dress himself, for he had many things to do, and feared the day would not be long enough. He decided first to pay a visit to the countess and afterward to Mademoiselle Dorgères, for he felt that he must lose no time in destroying the illusion in which Alice had been indulging since her interview with Madame Yalta. There was also poor Vignory, who must be greatly troubled by the change in the manner of his betrothed, and who must be re-assured.

Maxime had only his hat and overcoat to put on, when his servant brought him the card of a gentleman who wished to see him. Maxime, being anxious to avoid any loss of time, was about to give orders not to admit the visitor, when, to his very great surprise, he read on the card the name of Dr. Villagos. The doctor had never before visited him. They met almost every evening at the club, and very frequently at the countess's, but there had never been any exchange of visits ; nor in spite of their frequent meetings had their relations become any more intimate ; in fact, since the illness of his noble patient, the doctor had treated Maxime with unwonted reserve. So what could have brought the Hungarian to the Rue de Châteaudun ? Maxime decided that he must have been sent by the countess, so he gave orders for his admittance, promising himself to watch his visitor closely, and to make no indiscreet revelations.

The doctor entered smilingly, and shook hands with unusual cordiality. "You must be rather surprised to see me so early, my dear sir," he remarked.

"Surprised and delighted," was Maxime's polite response.

"I should not have ventured to disturb you at this unheard-of hour, had I not brought you tidings of a person in whom you are greatly interested, I am sure."

"The Countess Yalta ? How is she ?"

"Well, I suppose. I have not seen her yet this morning."

"I was sorry to find her unable to sit up yesterday."

"She received you, then ?"

Maxime bit his lip. He perceived, too late, that he had committed an indiscretion in spite of all his sage resolutions. "Yes," he replied, with

some embarrassment, "she was kind enough to do so, but I recollected your orders, and made my visit very short."

"Oh, I shan't scold her," laughed the doctor; "besides, it would be useless; she wouldn't listen to my remonstrances. She likes you very much, and she pretends that diversion will prove more effectual than all my remedies. Moreover, I have confidence in you, and feel sure you will not disturb her tranquility by exciting conversation. But it is not of my dear patient that I desired to speak to you?"

"Of whom, then?" inquired Maxime quickly, his curiosity being aroused.

"Of a woman who puzzled you very much a couple of months ago. You remember that beautiful brunette I pointed out to you one evening at the rink?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Well, the following morning while we were breakfasting together, you told me the trick she had played on you, and how anxious you were to know what class she belonged to; but have you seen her since that evening?"

This unexpected question greatly disconcerted Maxime, who did not feel inclined to take Dr. Villagos into his confidence; but an immediate response was necessary, so he replied evasively: "I have seen her once since at the theatre."

"Did you speak to her?"

"No; she was with a gentleman—a foreigner, I thought."

"There can be little doubt of it," muttered the doctor as if talking to himself. Then he reflected a moment; but Maxime, more and more disturbed by these singular questions, could not long remain silent. "You know her then?" he inquired, watching M. Villagos with some anxiety.

"One of my acquaintances knows her, and was with her on the day before yesterday when I passed her in the street. He told me such a strange story about her that I came here expressly to relate it to you. Ah, well, my friend, this creature who amuses herself with rinks, and who looks like an Andalusian, is a Russian, a Russian Nihilist—one of those lunatics who dream of destroying everything."

"It is incredible!" exclaimed Maxime, feigning astonishment, though the doctor had told him nothing new. "And is the friend who has given you this information sure of the truth of his statements?"

"Perfectly sure. You will see in a moment that he is thoroughly acquainted with the lady's habits. The evening you accompanied her home she took you, I believe, to a new street known as the Rue Jouffroy, and entered a small house on the left hand side?"

"Yes," replied Maxime, unhesitatingly, seeing no reason why he should deny the fact.

"And when you called the next morning to inquire for her, were you not informed that no such person lived there?"

"How did you learn that?"

"I guessed it. You were too much infatuated with the woman to be discouraged by one rebuff. Moreover, my friend informed me that the lady had apartments there which she never occupied two nights in succession."

"Did your friend also tell you that she had returned there?"

"Yes; and it was to tell you this that I called. She arrived yesterday, and is still there."

"Your friend is mistaken; she is no longer there," said Dorgères, thoughtlessly.

"She *was* there last evening, and, unless she left again during the night—— However, prepare yourself for a disappointment. Do you know why she has returned to take temporary possession of that mysterious dwelling? In order to receive there one of her accomplices, with whom you are much better acquainted than you are with me—your uncle's former secretary."

"Robert de Carnoël!" exclaimed Maxime.

"The same," said Dr. Villagos, quietly. "You see our dear countess was very wrong to take such an interest in that young man."

"I was not aware that she did."

"Good, good!" laughed the doctor. "I was aware that she had requested you to be silent on the subject. She distrusted me a little, because she knew that I did not approve of her romantic fancies, and she wished to conceal the fact that you had promised to assist her in finding Carnoël; but she has since admitted that she has persuaded you to embark in this absurd enterprise."

"I do not understand you," stammered Maxime.

"I see that you are very prudent, but I don't blame you in the least. Though Madame Yalta has told me everything, I don't ask you to tell me what you have done; and, indeed, I am going to aid you by furnishing you with some valuable information about the man you are seeking. If he is not in the house in the Rue Jouffroy, I know where he is. His accomplice has another home which my friend knows very well."

"Where is it?" Maxime inquired eagerly.

"Only a moment ago you were pretending you cared nothing about Carnoël!" exclaimed M. Villagos. "If that were the case you would not now be so anxious to learn his whereabouts."

Maxime hung his head. He felt that he had betrayed a part of his secret in his eagerness, and wondered if it would not be as well to divulge the rest. He certainly had no reason to regard the doctor's intentions with suspicion. M. Villagos was Madame Yalta's physician; he possessed her confidence; and though the countess had at first thought proper to conceal her plans from him, it would seem that she had changed her mind, since the doctor knew everything.

"Don't be afraid," continued Villagos. "I think Madame Yalta did wrong to induce you to undertake this enterprise; but the mischief is done, and my only desire is to serve you. I shan't be sorry to rescue M. de Carnoël from the clutches of this worthless creature, and I have it in my power to do so. I find that my friend, who knows her thoroughly, has a hold upon her, and can even force her to leave the country. We will compel her to relinquish Monsieur de Carnoël, and then we will make arrangements for him to embark at once for America, for I suppose you have given up the idea of establishing his innocence so that he may marry your cousin?"

"Oh, yes," replied Maxime. "I no longer have any idea of that."

"Good; we are already agreed on one point. Well, we must next decide concerning the woman. These female Nihilists are wonderfully adroit in eluding their enemies, especially this one, who has a great deal of money and many other resources at her command. Any mistake would be irreparable. Now, she can only be in one of two houses, that in the Rue Jouffroy or——"

"I can swear that she has left the Rue Jouffroy."

"Very well. I have perfect confidence in you. You must have good grounds for your assertion. Then we have only to present ourselves at a certain house to which this woman and her young friend have transferred their abode."

"When?"

"This evening if you like, or rather to-night, for it would not be advisable for us to be seen entering the house of a woman whose strange habits must inevitably have awakened the curiosity of her neighbours. This second abode of hers is a poorly-furnished lodging in the Faubourg Saint Honoré, close to Saint Philippe du Roule."

"What! such an elegant woman live in that neighbourhood?"

"She is elegant when it suits her to be so; but if the interests of the Nihilists required it, she would not hesitate to assume the dress of a mendicant and beg in the streets."

"It is incredible, and I can only marvel at the extent of your information," murmured Maxime, who could not entirely overcome his feeling of distrust.

"It is easily explained by the fact that my friend has been intimately connected with her. He was once madly in love with her, and I don't wonder at it, for she is certainly very beautiful; but he had the courage to separate from her when he learned that she was an active Nihilist. Besides, she makes no attempt to conceal the fact. In France she incurs little or no risk; and she often amused herself by disclosing to her lover the atrocious schemes of the revolutionists she served."

"Did she ever allude to a theft recently committed?"

"That at your uncle's bank? No; she never mentioned it to my friend, for he parted from her last summer, and this affair, I believe, is of recent date. You seem surprised to find that I am also acquainted with it, but the countess gave me a brief account. But to return to my friend, though there is no longer anything in common between them, he still possesses a great influence over the woman; first, because he is acquainted with her secret, and also because he once rescued her from a very dangerous position. Now, I will explain our mode of procedure, in case you agree to accompany us."

"I will do so gladly. Where shall we meet?"

"Would you object to meeting us at midnight at the Champs Elysées circus?"

"Not at all."

"Very well; from there we three will go to the house where she is concealing herself."

"We shall go armed, I suppose? It would be more prudent. One never knows what may happen."

"Armed! why? You don't suppose the lady will receive you with a pistol shot? Oh! she will take good care not to create a disturbance; and Monsieur de Carnoël will be equally anxious to avoid publicity. I shall not even take a cane, and I advise you to follow my example."

Maxime, however, was not of the same opinion, and so he remarked: "This woman may be surrounded by persons quite capable of murdering us when we are once in the house."

"What!" exclaimed M. Villagos, laughing heartily. "You don't suppose she takes her servants to a place of that description?"

"I don't know anything about that ; but I do know that she had three or four persons in her service in the Rue Jouffroy."

"They were probably dismissed when the jade left her house, for you are certain that she has left it, are you not?" inquired Villagos.

"Yes," replied Maxime, with some embarrassment.

He regretted having committed himself so much in the early part of the conversation, and to try and repair his blunder, he had recourse to a rather artless falsehood. "I went to the Rue Jouffroy yesterday morning, and made some inquiries," he said. "The house has been occupied for some time ; but I was told that the lady was never alone there. Her servants were in livery, and all wore a foreign air ; at least, so the neighbours pretend."

"All Nihilists, no doubt, who returned whence they came when she ceased to need them. These birds of ill-omen are incessantly travelling through Europe."

"Speaking of servants, is Madame Yalta quite certain of the fidelity of hers?" Maxime suddenly asked.

"Absolutely certain. All those in her employ have been with her for several years, and are anxious to remain with her. They all worship her, and would willingly give their lives for her."

"But what about the professors she employs, for instance?"

"Oh, yes ; her riding-master, her teacher of gymnastics, and her fencing-master, to say nothing of my compatriot who teaches her the noble game of chess."

"I have only met the fencing master, a Pole, I believe."

"The most enthusiastic Pole in the world, and a political refugee. But there is no connection between Poland and Nihilism."

"Then you don't think it likely that he knows the brunette of the skating rink?"

"How the devil could he know her? He never goes anywhere. But why do you ask that, my dear Dorgères?"

"Oh, I only fancied I saw him some time ago, attired like a gentleman, and escorting Madame Sergent. I must have been mistaken."

"You certainly must have been," said Villagos, who was, in reality, listening attentively, though he feigned indifference. "Kardiki in gentleman's attire is highly improbable ; and even if he were dressed like a prince, Madame Sergent would not appear in public with him. I would bet anything that you were thinking of him when you alluded to a possible conflict at the damsel's house. Perhaps you thought he had accompanied her to her present home."

"I confess I did think it probable, but I think so no longer."

A gleam of triumph flashed from the doctor's eyes ; and a keen physiognomist would have read in his countenance that he had just acquired the long-sought proof of a fact of great importance. "Then you will give up your plan of arming yourself to the teeth for our expedition to-night?"

"Oh, I'm not afraid," said Maxime, who detected the hidden irony of the doctor's words ; "and even if this Kardiki is one of Madame Sergent's body-guard, I shall go unarmed."

"I don't doubt your courage, I assure you, but when an expedition of this kind is on hand, I always make it a rule to go in evening dress. The main thing is to act quietly, and when a man carries a revolver he is always tempted to make use of it. So it is agreed that we are to meet at

the *rond-point* in the Champs Elysées, at midnight. Allow me to leave you now ; I have a dozen patients to see this morning."

Maxime offered his hand to the doctor, but made no attempt to detain him.

"Speaking of patients," continued M. Villagos, "I must tell you that the countess has been foolish enough to go into the country to-day. It rains, and it is very cold, but this makes no difference to her. She made up her mind to visit the château of a friend who is spending the winter some twenty miles from Paris, and all my efforts to deter her proved unavailing. I merely mentioned this in case you intended to call on her to-day."

"That's strange," muttered Maxime. "When I saw her yesterday she didn't speak of going away."

"For the excellent reason that she had not thought of it then. The fine idea entered her head during the night, and this morning she wrote, informing me that she would leave at nine o'clock. It is now half-past ten. She is already nearly at her journey's end, and won't return to-day ; so I shall postpone my visit until to-morrow, and advise you to do the same."

"I shall follow your advice," said Dorgères, once more shaking hands with the doctor, who now appeared to be in a hurry to depart.

Madame Yalta's absence from home deranged Maxime's plans considerably ; and, instead of repairing to the Avenue de Friedland, as he had intended, he proceeded straight to the Rue de Suresnes, where he was not a little surprised to learn from the porter, Denlevant, that M. Dorgères had sent a messenger for him, and was now awaiting him in his office. He found the banker walking up and down in great agitation, and saw that a storm was impending.

"Here you are ! All right ! I have heard some fine things about you !"

"What have I done, my dear uncle ?" inquired Maxime, somewhat disconcerted.

"Something very wrong. You have assured my daughter that the rascal she dotes on has been unjustly accused, and that I had no right to send him away. The result is, that Alice has just assured me that she won't marry Vignory ; and, what is more, that she won't marry at all. If she persists in this fine resolution, you can boast of having spoiled her life and mine. I won't speak of the friend whose hopes you have destroyed by the same blow ; but why have you so ruthlessly shattered your cousin's future ? Is this the way you reward me for having always treated you as a son ?"

"I was wrong, I admit."

"Do you suppose that will suffice ? Do you think by confessing that you have acted in an inexcusable manner you will repair the misery you have caused ?"

"No, certainly not. I wish to atone, and I will atone, don't doubt it, my dear uncle. I resolved to do so some hours ago ; and I had already decided to come here this morning to tell you how I intended to replace matters on the footing on which I found them when I thoughtlessly interfered."

"It is too late. Even if you retracted what you have said before Alice, she wouldn't listen to you."

"She will be compelled to yield to evidence, and I have proofs that

Monsieur de Carnoël is the accomplice, and, perhaps, the lover of a woman who was implicated in the robbery of the safe. I will begin by a confession that will amaze you. The theft of the colonel's casket and of the fifty thousand francs was preceded by another attempt to rob the safe, an attempt of which Vignory and myself had indubitable evidence."

"And you did not warn me!"

"Vignory wished to warn you, but I objected. One Wednesday evening we had dined together, and were coming to spend the evening at your house, when we saw a light in the office, and went in. We found there a woman's hand caught in the mechanical appliance that protects the safe."

"A hand! What absurd story are you telling me?"

"Yes, a hand, which the thief's accomplice had severed from the body; a hand which I threw into the Seine, and which was afterwards found and placed on exhibition in the Morgue."

"What! the story with which the papers were filled——"

"Had for its beginning an attack upon your safe. Vignory and I could have solved the enigma that excited Paris for a month."

"And why did you not do so?"

"I had resolved to find the owner of this hand unaided."

"That is very like you. But why did Vignory consent to countenance such an act of folly? It was his duty to inform me, and his failure to do so is inexcusable. He was my clerk, and he deceived me. I will never forgive you. Had I known that this had occurred, I should have taken my precautions, and the thieves would not have returned again."

"That is very probable, I admit; and I have often reproached myself for having been the cause of the unfortunate events that followed. But I did not do so until it was too late, and until after I had engaged in an undertaking which I wished to bring to a successful termination. I wished to ascertain if Robert de Carnoël were guilty. I had reasons for doubting it, for I was sure he had taken no part in the first attempt, as he was in your drawing-room at the time the robbery was committed."

Maxime was here interrupted by the entrance of the office-boy, who came to announce that Colonel Borisoff wished to speak to M. Dorgères on very important business. "I have no time to see him," replied the hanker, brusquely.

"Excuse me, uncle," said Maxime; "but will you do me the favour to see Colonel Borisoff, and to allow me to be present at the interview. I shan't be in the way, for I am certain he has come to speak to you respecting your former secretary."

"Why should you suppose that?" inquired M. Dorgères, shrugging his shoulders. "The colonel has a large sum of money deposited with me. It is more probable that he has come on business."

"The business that occupies him just now is not a financial matter," replied Maxime, resolutely, "and I am certain that the conversation will relate to Monsieur de Carnoël. If you will allow me to be present at the interview you will learn much more speedily all that I have to tell you, and perhaps many things of which I am still ignorant."

"Very well; but if Monsieur Borisoff wishes to see me in private I cannot insist upon your presence. In such a case, go to my room and wait for me, and we will afterwards resume our conversation. Show Colonel Borisoff in," he said, turning to the lad, who stood waiting for orders.

An instant afterwards the door re-opened and the colonel entered.

"Pray excuse me for insisting upon an interview," he said, after bowing rather coldly. "I leave for Russia this evening, and wished to see you before my departure."

"I am at your service, sir. This gentleman, colonel, is my nephew; but if you desire to see me in private——"

"I have already had the honour of meeting Monsieur Maxime Dorgères," said Borisoff, very deliberately, "and I congratulate myself upon finding him here, for I came to speak to you of a matter with which he has been connected; and if he were not here, I should probably have requested you to send for him. You can, perhaps, guess the cause of my sudden departure from Paris?" the colonel continued.

"No; I confess that I can't," replied the banker.

"Then you are not aware that another dastardly attempt upon the life of the Emperor, my master, has been made at St. Petersburg. This time the scoundrels tried to blow up the Winter Palace. The Emperor escaped death by a miracle; but several brave soldiers perished."

"It is abominable!" said M. Dorgères, earnestly; "and probably this crime is the work of those bandits whom you call Nihilists, I believe."

"It is impossible to doubt it. These brigands have declared war against the sovereign and society. It is the right and duty of the government to defend its sacred interests, and summon all the servants upon whose devotion it can rely. I am one of them, and am about to leave Paris for good."

"My best wishes accompany you, colonel. I abhor the enemies of property and family ties," said M. Dorgères. "You probably desire to draw the money deposited with me, and I will give orders which will enable you to do so this very day."

"Thank you, but I have come to confer with you on a subject more interesting than the balancing of an account. Have you ever wondered why I spent the last two years in Paris?"

"I have always supposed it was for your own pleasure."

"You are mistaken, sir. I was sent here to watch the Nihilists."

"The Russian Government is quite right to have the criminal acts of these wretches watched by its diplomatists."

"The diplomatists don't suffice for this task. I am not attached to the Russian Embassy. I represent the political police of the empire here."

"What! the police?" repeated M. Dorgères, slightly disconcerted by this revelation.

"Yes, and the casket which I entrusted to your keeping contained documents of the greatest importance, relating to conspiracies against the government, a list of persons connected with the Nihilist movement, and reports of the proceedings of certain individuals who emigrated after the last insurrection in Poland."

"Had I known this——"

"You would not have accepted the trust. I was certain of it, so I told you that my casket contained family papers and bonds. You have certainly not forgotten that this casket was stolen under very singular circumstances. The thieves had an accomplice in your household, there could be no doubt of that, and you agreed with me in thinking this accomplice was your secretary."

"I still think so. My nephew has proofs of it."

"Ah," said the colonel, looking fixedly at Maxime, who did not flinch,

"I was not mistaken, then, just now, when I remarked that this gentleman had been mixed up in this unfortunate affair."

"What do you mean?" asked the nephew in an aggressive tone.

"Take the trouble to listen to me and you will learn," replied Borisoff calmly. "I, too, have proofs that Monsieur de Carnoël was in league with the thieves. I searched for him, found him, arrested him, and detained him a long time in my house."

"Without informing me!" exclaimed the banker.

"It was unnecessary. You had given me *carte-blanche*, and I was to manage the affair as I liked. So I resolved not to place the culprit in your hands until I had extorted a full confession from him. However, your former secretary knew that his friends would not desert him, and maintained an obstinate silence."

"Then what are you going to do with him? If you intend to deliver him up to the French police, I shall not oppose it, but——"

"I shall not deliver him up to any one, for the very excellent reason that he has made his escape."

"Upon my word," exclaimed M. Dorgères, "I am not sorry to know that he has gone elsewhere to be hanged."

"He will not be hanged anywhere, for hanging is not practised in France, and I don't think he has any intention of leaving it. In fact he is in Paris, and not very far from the Rue de Suresnes, perhaps. It was to announce this fact that I came here."

"I am very much obliged to you, colonel," stammered the banker, who was overwhelmed with consternation by this revelation. "I shall take the necessary precautions."

"It would be advisable for you to do so, for I am satisfied that this man will attempt to force an entrance into your house. Yesterday I received a visit from a Russian, with whom I had no acquaintance whatever, but who represented himself to be an envoy sent by the general in charge of the political police. He came to Paris, he said, to confront Monsieur de Carnoël with a woman who is one of the most active agents of the Nihilists. He introduced me to this lady, and a supper was planned at her house, to which it was arranged that I should bring Monsieur de Carnoël. I did so, and found myself the victim of a most artful stratagem. These two persons had formed a conspiracy to obtain possession of my prisoner, and they did obtain possession of him. This morning a letter from St. Petersburg throws a little light on the events of the past night. No envoy had been sent here; the Russian was only a Nihilist in disguise."

"I was sure of it!" was the involuntary exclamation that escaped Maxime.

"You know this man, then?" Borisoff asked, quickly.

"I do not know him, but I have seen him," was the reply.

"Would you be kind enough to tell me where you have seen him?" M. Borisoff asked, with ironical politeness.

"I saw him dining with you last evening in a restaurant in the Avenue de l'Opera, and I followed you," replied Maxime, who had decided to reveal everything.

"You, too, were playing the detective, then, it seems to me."

"Precisely. It is permissible when one is dealing with a spy."

"Maxime!" exclaimed the banker, with a stern glance at his nephew.

"Oh, don't check him, sir," said the colonel, coolly; "his opinion affects me very little, and I still have several questions to ask of him."

"You wish to know how far I followed you. Be content; I know everything. I was at the opera when you entered that woman's box; I followed you to the Rue Jouffroy and saw everything."

"Accept my compliments, sir. The Nihilists have a valuable auxiliary in you."

"You know very well that I am not in league with the Nihilists."

"You say so, and I should like very much to believe it; but if you spent half the night in watching me, it was evidently not for the purpose of aiding me in my struggle with the people."

"Don't equivocate, I entreat. I learned that you were forcibly detaining a man who interested me, because I believed him to be unjustly accused, and I wished to know what you were going to do with him."

"Very well. May I venture to ask what is your opinion of Monsieur de Carnoël now?"

"I can answer without the slightest reserve. Monsieur de Carnoël is evidently the friend of the woman who played you such a trick last evening."

"Well and good! You also admit that this woman belongs to a sect that steals, burns, and assassinates?"

"I am the more willing to admit it, as I have proofs of it."

"And will you furnish me with this proof?"

"What good would it do? You have just told us that you are about to leave France for good. Besides, my conviction rests upon facts which are purely personal in their character, and which it is not necessary for you to know. As for Monsieur de Carnoël's complicity, I have no doubt of it. He has been rescued by a depraved creature, assisted by a pretended police agent, and has taken refuge in an asylum provided by them. So he is one of the band."

"You are wonderfully well informed," remarked Borisoff, with a malicious smile.

"Not much better than you are," retorted Maxime. "However, after your departure the house was searched, and we ascertained, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that all the members of the band, including Monsieur de Carnoël, had made their escape over the garden wall."

"I am greatly obliged for the information, but I had a trusty agent there who gave me a truthful account of all that occurred. I will add that I did not come to see your uncle to converse with him on the political side of this affair. It matters little to him, I suppose, whether his former secretary did, or did not, conspire against the Russian Government; what he does desire are proofs that this person is a thief."

"You are right, colonel," exclaimed the banker. "A conspirator might excite interest, while if I were sure Carnoël was a thief——"

"Well, then, when Monsieur de Carnoël fell into my hands, I did with him as the police of every country do with their prisoners. He was searched, and five packages, containing bank-notes to the amount of ten thousand francs each, were found upon his person."

"The precise amount stolen from me. This is conclusive."

"So conclusive that I have great difficulty in believing it," muttered Maxime.

"Here is the amount," continued Borisoff, drawing a roll of bank-notes from his pocket. "I return it as I found it."

"It is easy to procure fifty thousand francs when one has the funds of a government at one's disposal," muttered Maxime, regarding Borisoff with evident suspicion.

"I cannot accept this money, at least without being certain of the source it comes from," stammered the banker, also a little in doubt as to the colonel's sincerity.

"If you refuse, I shall feel obliged to give it to the poor, for it does not belong to me," replied Borisoff; "but I will prove that I did not put it in my pocket to effect the ruin of Monsieur de Carnoël. When I asked him how he came into possession of so large an amount, he replied that it had been sent to him by some one who owed money to his father."

"That is out of the question," said the banker. "His father died a ruined man, leaving not a single penny nor credit of any kind. The settlement of his estate was entrusted to me; and if any one had owed him fifty thousand francs, I should certainly have discovered it."

"That is about what I said to his son," remarked the colonel, "whereupon he showed me the accompanying letter, and you shall judge of the value of this justification. Here it is."

M. Dorgères took it, and glanced over it. "It isn't signed," he remarked, "and an anonymous restitution is not admissible. What do you think of it?" he asked, passing it to his nephew.

"I think this letter has every appearance of having been fabricated to suit the occasion," replied Maxime, after examining it attentively. "But the strangest thing about it is, that it is written upon the kind of paper in use among business men."

"And Monsieur de Carnoël, the father, never had any friends among men engaged in commercial pursuits. He was not a friend of mine, even though he honoured me with his confidence. If he lent money to any one, it was to some one in his own sphere in life. Besides, no merchant would reimburse money to the amount of fifty thousand francs in an anonymous letter."

"So, it follows that the son had the letter written to use in case he was compelled to explain how the money came into his possession. I think, gentlemen, you must now be satisfied respecting the morality of this Nihilist agent."

"Completely," exclaimed the banker.

"Then allow me to place the money and the letter in your hands," continued the colonel. "I shall trouble myself no further about Monsieur de Carnoël, as I am recalled to St. Petersburg. However, I carry with me the satisfaction of knowing that I have enlightened you in regard to a young man who has attempted to bring trouble into your family, and that I have left in your hands the means to crush him in case he ever repeated his audacious attempt." As he spoke, M. Borisoff placed the notes on the table, and handed the letter to M. Dorgères. "Now there only remains for me to take leave of you, gentlemen," he added, rising. "My majordomo will call at three o'clock to draw my money. He has, as you are aware, a power of attorney."

"The money will be ready," replied the banker. "But, as for this sum, I don't know——"

"It will always be in your power to devote it to charity," interrupted the colonel. "Farewell, sir; I dare not say 'till we meet again,' for I never expect to return to France. Present my best respects to Mademoiselle Dorgères, and accept my best wishes for your future prosperity." Before leaving the room, he turned to give this bit of counsel to Maxime:

"Take my advice, sir," he said, "and don't try to pursue Monsieur de Carnoël's rescuers. They would simply kill you."

Just as he disappeared, Joseph, the valet, entered by another door, and said :

"Mademoiselle sends me to inform monsieur that breakfast is waiting."

"Very well, tell her I am coming," said M. Dorgères, impatiently.

The servant withdrew, and Maxime and his uncle were left alone. "The devil take this Russian, with his revelations and restitutions!" exclaimed the banker. "I have a great mind to run after him and return these cursed bank-notes!"

"Why should you?" asked the nephew. "Do you suppose he has taken them from his own pocket to have the pleasure of dishonouring Monsieur de Carnoël? I don't think Monsieur Borisoff capable of such an act."

"Then you think he told the truth?"

"Yes, so far as finding the fifty thousand francs in the pocket of your former secretary is concerned. It remains to be discovered who wrote the letter."

"Have you any doubt but what it was this unfortunate young man?"

"Not much, though it upsets the idea I had formed of his character. But what of that? Between the act of stealing money and the deed he committed the difference is very slight. Association with scoundrels who break open safes, on the plea of political differences, and who blow up palaces, is more than enough to destroy the integrity of any man; and this, I am sure, was the case with Carnoël."

"And so am I, since I heard your conversation with Borisoff, though I only understood half of it."

"Permit me to explain. I have already told you that I once had in my possession the hand which had been severed by the thief's accomplice. I also had a bracelet which was found on this hand, and which I kept as a means of discovering the person who had left it in the grim clutches of your safe. One evening, while exhibiting it at a skating-rink, I met a very pretty woman, who allowed me to accompany her home, and who led me to a spot where three villains, in league with her, were waiting to murder me and take the bracelet from me."

"You told me about that adventure. I believe it was Georget who extricated you from the difficulty."

"Precisely. The jade disappeared, and I had given up all hope of meeting her again, when, some time afterwards, I saw her in a box at the Variétés. She greeted me in the most cordial manner imaginable, and I invited her to supper, which she accepted; but during the repast she found a way to make her escape, taking the bracelet with her; so it was very clear that this creature had been employed by the thief to obtain possession of an article which might be the means of convicting her. Now, last night I recognised the woman who tricked Borisoff and fled with Carnoël. She was the very one with whom I had twice had difficulty on account of the bracelet; in short, the plenipotentiary of the woman who lost her hand in the attempt to steal the casket from you. And now, don't you think I am right in declaring that Carnoël is in league with these scoundrels?"

"There can be no doubt of it. But I am not the person to whom you must tell this in order to repair the mischief you have done. You must tell Alice as well. You don't realise the condition of things here. My life is intolerable; Alice neither speaks nor eats; Vignory looks about as cheerful as a funeral. It is enough to drive one mad."

"I ask only twenty-four hours before making an announcement to my cousin that will produce a decisive effect."

"Why this delay, when there is nothing to prevent you from revealing everything now? She is waiting for me; breakfast with us."

"I will breakfast with you to-morrow morning, if you like; and as I am going this evening to lay hands on Monsieur de Carnoël and his mistress—for this Nihilist is his mistress——"

"What! are you going to arrest them? It will be a dangerous expedition. Do you remember what the colonel said to you?"

"What did he say?"

"He said 'Take care; they will kill you.'"

"Have no fears; I shall not be killed."

"There will never be any change in you. You will always go heedlessly on, suspecting nothing. You forget you are dealing with villains who don't shrink from any crime. They have just blown up the Winter Palace; it would be a much easier matter to assassinate you."

"Yes; but I am not the Emperor of Russia, and we are not in St. Petersburg. Besides, I shall not be alone."

Just then Jules Vignory entered. He had a rather anxious mien, and seemed a little surprised to find Maxime in M. Dorgères' office. "Ah!" said the banker, "I wanted to speak to you."

"I am at your service, sir," murmured Vignory, who saw that a storm was imminent.

"Why didn't you tell me of the first attempt to rob my safe? Oh, don't feign astonishment. I know all. Maxime has just told me the story of the severed hand."

"He ought to have done so before," replied the cashier, promptly. "It was he who forced me to be silent."

Maxime uttered never a word; but he frowned. He thought Vignory over-ready to exculpate himself at the expense of a friend.

"I know that," said M. Dorgères, "and so I am not so offended as I should otherwise be, though it seems to me that you failed in the duty imposed upon you by your position. But let us say no more about the past. Do me the favour now to examine these packages of bank-notes," added the banker, pointing to the money which was still lying on the table.

Vignory took it up and began to count the notes. "There are fifty of them," he remarked.

"Where do you suppose they came from?"

"From my safe, undoubtedly. I myself must have fastened them. I am certain of it by the manner in which the pin is inserted—a little more to the right, and lower down than in the packages made up at the Bank of France."

"Very well, that settles it. My rogue of a secretary can no longer insist that he did not steal the money."

"What! can it be——"

"Yes, we have recovered the stolen money, and it only rests with me to have Carnoël arrested. He is in Paris, and I have the proof of his infamy in my hands. Would you believe it, he has had the audacity to pretend that this money was sent to him by some one who owed it to his father. He had a letter written to that effect. Read it, and tell me what you think of it."

Vignory turned pale, and took the letter with a trembling hand

"The imposture is evident," he stammered, after glancing over it. "It is very clumsily done, too. This letter must have been dictated by Monsieur de Carnoël, probably to one of his friends. Still, I don't recognise the handwriting."

"But you must know Robert de Carnoël's friends. You were as intimate with him as it was possible to be."

"He had but few friends," stammered Vignory. "Only some college chums, whom he met but seldom."

"Then it is useless to try and discover the writer of this letter," remarked the banker.

"I think so; still, sir, if you would entrust it to me perhaps I might—"

"No, it would only be a waste of time. I know now what to think of the young man, and I only wish to convince those who are still in doubt of the correctness of my opinion. This letter is a proof, and I am going to keep it."

The door opened softly, and Alice appeared, but seeing that her father was not alone, she turned to go away. "Come in," exclaimed M. Dorgères.

It had occurred to him that it would be as well to take advantage of Maxime's presence to strike a decisive blow; but recollecting that the presence of his cashier would place him under constraint in his explanation with his daughter, he took Vignory aside, and said in a low tone: "My good fellow, have the kindness to leave us; I can plead your cause better than you can yourself. You did wrong to follow the advice of my hare-brained nephew, but it is not a criminal offence after all; so go, and return and dine with us this evening."

Vignory could only obey, and he left the room with a drooping head and rather discomfited air. Alice avoided looking at him, but she exchanged a quick glance with her cousin, and read in his eyes that he was the bearer of bad news. "Your coming is very opportune," M. Dorgères remarked to his daughter. "I am sorry, though, that you did not arrive a little sooner; you would have found Colonel Borisoff here."

"Then I am very glad I didn't come. I detest that man."

"Yes," replied the banker, angrily, "you detest him because he agreed with me in thinking that Monsieur de Carnoël was the person who robbed my safe; but the time has come to speak plainly. The man you love is unworthy of you."

"You have told me so already, and I refuse to believe it—and I never shall believe it: nor does Maxime believe it any more than I do."

"Maxime!" exclaimed M. Dorgères. "Really, Alice, you have hit upon the right person. Ask him what he thinks of Monsieur de Carnoël."

Alice turned inquiringly to her cousin, who flushed scarlet and remained silent. "Come, come, speak!" cried his uncle. "Tell this foolish girl that my former secretary is in league with a band of scoundrels. I hope you are not going to retract your words before my daughter."

"No," murmured Maxime, "for unfortunately I have asserted nothing that is not strictly true."

"What!" murmured poor Alice, "you, too, abandon him—you who swore to me only yesterday—"

"Yesterday I believed that he was wrongly accused; to-day I am obliged to acknowledge that I was mistaken. For I have seen him flying in company with a woman who is certainly a thief."

"A woman!" repeated Mademoiselle Dorgères, despondently.

"Yes, and such a woman! A miserable creature who is devoted to the service of revolutionists of the basest order."

"And you pretend that he has fled with her! Why was it necessary for him to flee?"

"I entreat you, my dear Alice, not to insist upon knowing all the details of this most unfortunate affair. I will relate them if you demand it, but I hope that you will be content when I tell you, upon my word of honour, that Monsieur de Carnoël is a dishonourable man."

"I demand this assurance."

"I will give it. I declare, upon my honour, that Monsieur de Carnoël has committed acts which have created an impassable abyss between you and him. You should believe me, for I defended him as long as it was possible to defend him, and you know I have no interest in speaking disparagingly of him."

"So be it," said Alice, with an evident effort. "Where is he?"

"Where is he?" repeated M. Dorgères. "I hope you do not entertain any idea of running after him."

"I wish to know where he is."

"Do you insist?" inquired Maxime, deciding to end the matter. "Very well; he is at this woman's house."

"Prove that your assertion is true."

"How can you expect me to prove it? I cannot take you there, can I? But I am going there myself this very evening; I shall see him; I shall see his vile accomplice—and to-morrow, if it is necessary for me to repeat to you the confession I shall extort from them, for they are in my power, then——"

"Enough," interrupted Alice. "I believe you now, and nothing is left me but to die," she added, almost in a whisper.

"Die!" exclaimed her father. "Ungrateful child, do you no longer love me that you talk of dying? What have I done, that you should break my heart? It is I who will die of grief if you persist in your senseless resolve."

"No," said Alice, throwing herself in her father's arms, "no, father, I have not ceased to love you. But forgive me if I lack the courage to live. I will never leave you until God has the goodness to call me to Him."

She broke into passionate sobs as her father pressed her in his arms. Maxime, almost equally affected, bowed his head to conceal his emotion. "Speak," cried M. Dorgères, "help me to make her understand that it is wrong for her to torture me so; that she has no right to make my old age miserable by refusing to marry——"

"Never!" exclaimed Alice, disengaging herself from her father's embrace. "I can promise to be resigned; but I cannot promise to forget. Still I solemnly swear never to speak the name of the man I loved, and I also ask you never to speak to me of him. I ask this of you, father, and of you, Maxime, also."

"Don't fear that we shall ever revert to such an unpleasant subject," replied M. Dorgères, who began to feel the necessity of putting an end to this painful scene. "You shall do as you please, my dear child. Wisdom will return to you, perhaps, and I will wait. And now go to the dining-room and wait for me; I have a few words to say to your cousin."

Alice held up her forehead to be kissed, and left the room. She had hardly disappeared when her father exclaimed to Maxime, "My dear boy, you are restored to your old place in my regard. You have been firm, and

but for your help I don't know what I should have done with my wayward girl."

"Alas! I fear my firmness has not improved the situation."

"You are mistaken. The blow has struck home; time will do the rest."

"I hope so, my dear uncle; but I pity poor Vignory."

"He is not so greatly to be pitied; and in any case my anxiety is not on his account. My daughter is the first consideration with me. If you could finish what you have so well begun——"

"Cure her! I desire nothing better; but I cannot vouch for it. Still there may be a way, perhaps——"

"Indicate it, and if it costs half of my fortune——"

"Oh, money will do no good; but I know some one who might. Will you give me full permission to see Alice whenever I like, and with whomsoever I choose."

"Certainly."

"Then I am going, for I haven't a moment to lose."

"When shall I see you again?" cried M. Dorgères.

"As soon as I have succeeded." And as Maxime descended the stairs he murmured to himself, "The countess alone can convert Alice."

XVII.

MAXIME left his uncle's house even more perplexed than when he had entered it. Still, as he had thought, one resource certainly remained. The Countess Yalta might put an end to this painful situation by declaring to Alice that she had been deceived respecting M. de Carnoël. Her word would be readily believed, as Alice knew that she had defended the absent one as long as she had believed him innocent. Maxime was not deceived by the sentiments his cousin had expressed with such vehemence in his presence. She had been silenced by his statements, but hope was still lurking in the recesses of her breaking heart, and she was resigned only in appearance. She had renounced Robert for the time being, but she was likewise resolved to retain her liberty, for she still hoped that the hour of her lover's vindication would come.

It was now necessary to destroy this last illusion, and Madame Yalta alone could do so. Maxime counted on her assistance in this delicate and painful operation. He was impatient to see her and tell her all he had discovered about M. de Carnoël; but Dr. Villagos had told him that the countess would be absent for twenty-four hours, and he was consequently obliged to defer his visit until the morrow. He was mechanically walking down the Rue de Châteaudun, when, on crossing the Rue de Suresnes, the idea of calling on Georget occurred to him. He had not seen him since the famous walk which had resulted in such an unexpected discovery, so the best thing he could do would be to return home by the Rue Cardinet. Besides, the Rue Cardinet was not far from the Rue Jouffroy, and Maxime wished to ask the obliging porter if anything new had occurred in the deserted house. On reaching the Parc Monceau he took a look at Borisoff's residence, and was able to satisfy himself that the Russian agent had told the truth, for his servants were engaged in loading a van with luggage in the courtyard. Evidently the master was about to depart. "Good riddance," murmured Maxime, "may he never come back again!

Maxime then walked on to the end of the Rue de Vigny, and, lost in thought, he was crossing the Boulevard de Courcelles, when a sudden cry aroused him from his reverie. Looking up, he saw a horse's chest almost grazing his own; a horse harnessed to an open vehicle, and driven by a lady who had just accomplished the feat of checking a thorough-bred animal which was going at the top of its speed. Maxime sprang quickly aside, and was about to apologise for an inattention which had nearly cost him dear, when he recognised Madame Yalta leaning back and pulling hard at the reins to restrain her steed. She had been on the point of crushing a man who would willingly have died for her, but in a different fashion. "You!" she exclaimed, turning pale at the thought of the danger he had incurred.

"You!" also cried Maxime, amazed at this unexpected meeting.

"Let me take you in," said the countess, in an agitated voice. "Jump in at once. Nedji is impatient." Maxime at once sprang in beside Madame Yalta, who relaxed her hold on the reins, and the fiery animal flew off like a cannon-ball. "I was terribly frightened," murmured the countess. "A single step more, and you would have been under my horse's feet."

"I owe my life to you," replied Maxime, promptly, "and the joy of seeing you again would have consoled me, even if I had been injured. I had found it hard to postpone my visit until to-morrow, and here you are back again!"

"Back again! What do you mean? I only went out for an hour, and was returning in expectation of your visit."

"What! You didn't leave this morning to spend the day at a château some distance from Paris?"

"No, indeed."

"How does it happen, then, that Dr. Villagos told me——"

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes, he called on me this morning. It is the first time he has ever been at my house."

"What did he say to you? Speak—tell me at once!"

"He said—— I scarcely know where to begin," stammered Maxime, surprised to see the countess display so much eagerness. "He said so many things, repeating that your state of health made great prudence necessary; and begging me, as usual, not to prolong the interviews you were pleased to grant me, and to avoid certain topics of conversation."

"Did he ask you not to speak to me of Monsieur de Carnoël?"

"Not in so many words; but from certain remarks he let fall, I saw that he knew you were interesting yourself in the unfortunate young man's behalf."

"I hope you dissuaded him from any such idea?" said the countess.

"I tried," replied Maxime, with some embarrassment, "but I fear he still persists in the belief, the more so as he also is interesting himself in the discovery of Robert de Carnoël."

"What! he has dared——"

"It was all the result of chance, so far as he is concerned. While walking with one of his friends, he met the woman of whom I have previously spoken to you—the associate of the thief who lost her hand in trying to open my uncle's safe. His friend told him that this woman lived in a house in the Rue Jouffroy, and that she had been the mistress of Robert de Carnoël. He told me this, and——"

"It is false ! Villagos lied."

"He declared he has proofs."

"What proofs ?"

"Last night some events took place, which I have been longing to relate to you. I was the witness of some strange scenes in this same Rue Jouffroy—scenes in which Monsieur de Carnoël played the principal part, and I am now certain that he is the lover and accomplice of this disreputable creature."

"And did you tell Villagos what you had seen ?" inquired the countess, in an agitated voice.

"No ; but either he saw it himself, his friend informed him, or he guessed what I wished to conceal from him, for I think he knows all."

"It is well. Now I know what awaits me," murmured the countess. She spoke almost in a whisper, and yet Maxime heard her. "What do you mean ?" he exclaimed.

"Nothing," replied Madame Yalta, coldly. "Go on, pray. You have just declared that Monsieur de Carnoël is a scoundrel. The doctor is of the same opinion, I suppose ?"

"It would be more correct to say that I share his. He dispelled my last doubts. He told me what Carnoël had done after leaving the house in the Rue Jouffroy. But I ought to have begun by telling you what he was doing in that house, and by whom he was taken there."

"Never mind ; tell me what followed."

"Ah, well, madame, since you insist, I must tell you that Villagos informs me that Carnoël has followed his mistress, who has taken him to a house where he is still with her."

"And do you believe this story ?"

"Why should I not believe it ? The doctor has offered to take me there. We are to go this evening, or rather to-night. I am to meet him and his friend in the Champs Elysées."

"You shall not go ; I forbid it."

"Will you allow me to ask why ?" said Maxime, surprised and yet delighted by the tone assumed by the countess. She would not have spoken in this imperative way had he been indifferent to her.

"Because it would be rushing straight to death," she replied, quickly.

"To death ?"

"Villagos wishes to draw you into a trap. You will not return alive if you accompany him to-night."

"What interest can this good doctor have in making away with me ?" inquired Maxime, smilingly.

"The same interest he had in preventing you from seeing me. You know things which he does not wish me to know. He went to your house for the express purpose of persuading you that I should be away until to-morrow. He had an object in telling this falsehood. If I had not chanced to meet you, I should not have seen you to-day ; and Villagos calculated that to-morrow you would no longer be alive."

"What ! Villagos, who boasts of being so devoted to you ? Villagos conspire against you ! I dare not say against *us*, though you have done me the honour of including me in the vengeance you accuse him of meditating."

"Don't jest. It is a most serious matter, as I will prove to you in a few moments. But come, have you seen your cousin since the events of last night ?"

"I have just seen her, but her father was present. There was a very painful scene. I did not conceal my opinion of Monsieur de Carnoël, and Alice did not contradict me, but she positively declared that she would never marry."

"Which means that she does not believe a single word of your charges, and that she intends to remain faithful to her absent lover until the day his innocence is proved. She is a woman; she has faith."

"So you commend the perseverance with which she still clings to her illusions? And to think I was counting on you to induce her to listen to reason, for she would listen to your counsels all the more readily as she knows that you were not prejudiced against Monsieur de Carnoël."

"If she follows them she will marry him. But not a word more, now. We will resume this conversation in a few moments, for here we are."

The Russian trotter sped along with almost incredible swiftness, and though the countess had selected the longest route, they were now entering the Avenue de Friedland. The countess stopped Nedji before the little side gate which Maxime had first entered under the escort of Dr. Villagos. She passed in first, and the young fellow followed her along a path that wound through the shrubbery, and ended in an immense conservatory full of flowers and tropical plants. "Here we can talk freely," said Madame Yalta. "No one will come in to interrupt us."

"Not even the doctor?" asked Maxime, laughing.

"No; for if he should call he will be told that I have not returned."

"Do you never intend to receive him again?"

"I shall see him once more, but it will be for the last time."

"Has he decided, then, to go over to the enemy?"

This question, to which Maxime attached no importance, made the countess start. "No," she replied, slowly; "it is I who desire to separate from him." And seeing that Maxime looked at her with an air of astonishment, she added: "Come, you shall know everything."

At one end of the conservatory was a nook adorned with camellias, and provided with furniture appropriate to such a floral boudoir—divans covered with Japanese stuff, rocking-chairs, and a bamboo table.

"So you saw Monsieur de Carnoël last night?" the countess asked, as they seated themselves.

"I caught only a glimpse of him, for he merely appeared and disappeared. Borisoff brought him in a close carriage, which he drove himself. M. de Carnoël was promptly escorted into the house, and left it almost immediately by scaling the garden wall with his accomplice. The colonel, who remained in the street, endeavoured to force his way into the house, but the neighbours came to the windows, and he was obliged to fly to escape arrest. What means this woman who saved him employed I don't know; but I must tell you that she had for her auxiliary no other man than your fencing-master."

To Maxime's great surprise this announcement was received with perfect indifference. "Ah! then, you recognised Kardiki?" the countess quietly remarked.

"Yes, although he was clad in the garb of a gentleman of fashion. He dined at Bignon's with Monsieur Borisoff, who certainly had no suspicions of the trick that was to be played upon him."

"Kardiki is remarkably clever."

"I don't doubt it; but don't you think he is betraying you?"

"What makes you suppose so?"

"His intimacy with a Nihilist, and the strange feat he accomplished under my very eyes."

"I do not know that this woman is a Nihilist, but I do know that Kardiki is a Polish exile, and that he has a right to circumvent the designs of a Russian spy."

"Then you are not displeased that he has taken the part of a pair of thieves, for this creature and Carnoël certainly helped the persons who opened my uncle's safe with a false key."

"You are mistaken. Monsieur de Carnoël does not even know them, and he met the woman who saved him for the first time last night."

"But she is certainly a thief, at the very least."

"No, not any more than he is."

"You do not know that the fifty thousand francs stolen from the safe were found upon the wretch. Borisoff has just returned them to my uncle, with a letter which Carnoël had written in order to explain how he had come into possession of the amount. It was sent to him, he pretends, by one of his father's friends, a nameless friend."

"Or by an enemy who resorted to this stratagem to ruin him. One of these explanations must be true, I admit."

There was a pause, Maxime was lost in wonder to hear Kardiki's strange conduct excused and even justified, and he had about decided to ask some direct questions, when a sound suddenly attracted his attention, and on turning he saw a gardener approaching with a watering-pot in his hand. The man's unusual height and his broad shoulders first attracted Maxime's notice, but when he glanced at his face he instantly recognised the spurious Russian nobleman, who had been both a house-porter in the Rue Jouffroy and the protector of Madame Sergent. This strange apparition elicited from Maxime a cry of astonishment which made the gardener raise his head.

"What is the matter with you?" inquired the countess.

"That man!" stammered Maxime.

"He is the person who takes charge of my flowers. He was about to make the round of the conservatory, but you see he is going away for fear of disturbing me." In fact, the man, after respectfully lifting his cap, had turned, and was retracing his steps.

"But he, too, knows the thief; he is even as intimately acquainted with her as your fencing-master. It was he who formerly occupied the house in the Rue Jouffroy, and who afterwards played the part of a foreign nobleman and protector of that worthless creature. He was her accomplice when she purloined the bracelet from me; I quarrelled with him, and we were to fight the next day."

"You see it was as well you did not carry out your project," said the countess, quietly; "you would have crossed swords with a servant."

"And are you not astonished to learn that your gardener is also the accomplice of M. de Carnoël's worthy friend?"

"None of these things surprise me; but I can very readily understand why all of them should be a surprise to you; and the hour has come to disclose what I would have been glad to conceal from you. Learn, then, that I know by whom, and for what purpose, the robbery which has occasioned so much sorrow was committed. First of all, recollect that only a casket belonging to a Russian spy was taken from your uncle's safe. You are going to assert that a certain sum of money was also taken. I

will refer to that presently, and prove that the facts of the case have been misrepresented."

"Then the thieves were Nihilists? I have always thought so."

"The government that employs Colonel Borisoff has other enemies than Nihilists. It is hated by all the proscribed, all who have defended Poland, and who are now living in exile. This Borisoff was commissioned to watch and denounce not only the Nihilists but the Poles who are still struggling against their oppressors. His casket contained written proofs of a widespread conspiracy against Russian tyranny. These papers had been given up by a traitor who has met with his just deserts, and the patriots who were compromised by them wished to regain possession of them at any cost. They were well informed, and knew that the scheme was not impracticable, as M. Dorgeres' safe was virtually unguarded from seven o'clock in the evening until midnight."

"Then they had friends in the house?"

"I do not deny it. But it matters little who helped them, when I assure you that it was not Monsieur de Carnoël. Well, two of them resolved to make the attempt."

"And one of them was a woman?"

"Yes; a woman devoted to the cause she served, devoted to the extent of sacrificing her life, and what was even more precious—her honour. The other was a Polish refugee who had spent ten years in the mines of Siberia, and who was ready to do anything for the sake of revenge."

"Ready to do anything; that expresses it exactly," muttered Maxime. The misfortunes of the Polish insurgents interested him but little, while he had an exalted respect for safes in general.

"They started out together one evening," continued the countess, without noticing Maxime's remark, "and effected an entrance into your uncle's offices. Some one was awaiting them who had procured a key to the safe, and who told them the word that would open it. The woman wished to open it herself, but the person who had given her the information was not aware of the terrible trap, which caught her hand just as she introduced the key into the lock. Her friends could not find the spring which it was necessary to touch to make the arms return to their place. Time was passing; some one might come in at any moment, and if she were discovered, all was lost. She did not hesitate, but ordered the man who accompanied her to cut off her hand at the wrist."

"And he consented to do her this frightful service?"

"He was under her orders, and obeyed. He had a large, sharp knife about him, and he severed the hand at once."

"And this strange heroine did not die? She did not fall fainting to the floor?"

"She had strength to conquer her agony. Her companion, who had served in the army, and who had some knowledge of surgery, bound up the wrist to stop the flow of blood, and led her away, though she was scarcely able to stand."

"She was dressed in masculine attire, was she not?"

"Yes."

"Then it was she and her accomplice that Vignory and I met under the gateway, just as we reached my uncle's house?"

"Probably. Then you both entered the office in which this scene had been enacted?"

"Yes ; we noticed the light, and Vignory was anxious, as he had good cause to be."

"There you found the hand. To remove it, your friend Vignory touched the spring. You thought yourselves alone, but some one heard and saw you. It was in this way that the thief, as you call her, learned that you had kept her bracelet to assist you in your search for her."

"So the traitor listened to my conversation and reported it to the person who paid him?"

"You are right, in a measure, only he was not paid ; but he did relate what he had heard, and the person whose ruin you had resolved to effect swore to regain possession of her bracelet, and to do so she chose a remarkably bold and clever woman—she whom you call the beauty of the rink. The latter failed in her first attempt to obtain possession of the bracelet. Still, this did not deter her from a subsequent attempt. You were closely followed, and were seen one evening entering the Variétés. She at once repaired there. You invited her to supper—it is unnecessary to tell you the rest."

"No, I have not forgotten the rest. So this creature only acted under orders. In fact, that is what I supposed, for she not only has both her hands, but she is very skilful in using them. But this olive-skinned brunette cannot possibly be a Russian?"

"No, she is French, and married to a Pole."

"I pity him. And now allow me to ask you how it is that your gardener has been associated with her in the divers farces she has enacted?"

"He is her husband."

"Her husband ! and tolerates the life she is leading ! He is certainly very amiable."

"You are mistaken respecting Justine. Her conduct is irreproachable. She loves her husband, and only acts in obedience to his wishes and those of a woman who protects her."

"Yes, the owner of the bracelet. But why has she protected Carnoël ? To save him from Borisoff was all very well, but to conceal him in her own house—that does not accord very well with this great love for her husband."

"It is absolutely false. Justine took Monsieur de Carnoël to a place of safety, but she is no longer with him. Dr. Villagos lied to you. He merely invented this story to draw you into a trap. He wishes to get rid of you, for you have interfered with his plans."

"Unconsciously, then. What plans has he ? Is he, too, a conspirator ?"

"He was the prime mover in the conspiracy referred to. Villagos directs all the measures against the Czar's government, and he has not the same wrongs to avenge as the Polish exiles. He passes for a Hungarian, but he is a Russian ; and his name is not Villagos, but Grisenko. He is a Nihilist."

"A Nihilist ! This amiable doctor, the favourite of the ladies, a Nihilist ! I should never have suspected it. Then he, too, must have been implicated in the theft of the casket ?"

"It was he who organised the scheme. He knew, too, from the very first, that Monsieur de Carnoël had disappeared, and that he was accused of the theft although not guilty. But it delighted him that an innocent man was accused, for this error diverted suspicion from the real culprits. However, the woman who had played the principal part in the affair was interested in M. de Carnoël, and resolved to repair the wrong she had unconsciously done him. To attain this object, it was necessary, first of all,

to find him, but her plan displeased Villagos, who feared she would compromise herself, and above all, the Nihilists; and he had good cause to fear this, for Carnoël had fallen into the hands of Borisoff, the Russian spy."

"Then the lady confided her plan to this Satanic doctor?"

"No; but he suspected it. She had casually expressed the sympathy with which Monsieur de Carnoël's misfortunes inspired her, and that was enough for him to understand that she would try to save the poor fellow. Well, the lady suspected that Carnoël was a prisoner in the house in the Rue de Vigny, and shaped her course accordingly. Villagos discovered this afterwards, through whom, I cannot say. You saw him this morning. He certainly tried to read your secret. Are you quite sure that you did not reveal it?"

"I!" exclaimed Maxime, "I reveal a secret that you had asked me to keep! I took good care not to do so. I listened to the doctor, but told him nothing, or almost nothing."

"Little as you may have said, it was far too much. Villagos is wonderfully sagacious and crafty; and I fear that, without knowing it, you gave him the information he desired."

"Is it my intelligence or my fidelity that you distrust?"

"Neither; but I think you are no match for a man who has spent his life in plotting and conspiring, and who can read the thoughts of others without revealing his own. In talking with him, did you not make some imprudent admissions? For instance, did you not say that Monsieur de Carnoël was taken to the house in the Rue Jouffroy last night?"

"It was he who said that. I told him that he was mistaken."

"And that Monsieur de Carnoël was no longer there, did you not?"

"That's true," replied Maxime, blushing a little, "but he knew it already."

"And, doubtless, you spoke of Kardiki?"

"I—no—I think not—"

"Be frank and conceal nothing, I beg. It is necessary I should know all."

"I assure you I did not say a word respecting the occurrences in the Rue Jouffroy. I only told him that I fancied I recognised your fencing-master in an opera box beside the beauty of the rink, but that I was by no means certain of it."

"Thank you," murmured the countess, who had become very pale, "I know now what the consequences of your conversation with this man will be."

"But he assured me that I must be mistaken, that Kardiki was only a poor devil, a Polish refugee, who had no acquaintance whatever with Mademoiselle Justine."

"And it was afterwards that he told you I had gone into the country?"

"Yes; but what connection can there be between this falsehood and the blunder I made in mentioning Kardiki's name?"

"If Villagos invented this story to prevent you from coming here, he did so because he did not wish you to inform me of Kardiki's strange conduct. I know, as I have told you, the lady who protects Justine, and who attempted to rescue Carnoël from the clutches of Borisoff. By doing so, this lady disobeyed the orders of the Nihilist committee—represented here by Villagos—and incurred the risk of a terrible punishment. Villagos thought that you would refer to your conversation with him, and that I

should become conscious of the danger that threatened her, and warn her of it. So he resolved to act before you had seen me."

"Ah, well! his Machiavellan scheme has failed, and now that I understand the situation, I will take it upon myself to bring Monsieur Villagos to his senses. Will you allow me to begin by boxing his ears, in order to teach him that he cannot treat me as he did this morning with impunity?"

"No," replied the countess, quickly, "to play your life against his is not to be thought of—the struggle would be too unequal. It is for me—for me alone to act—for I alone can save my friend, and all who have incurred the wrath of the Nihilists. But before engaging in this struggle, I wish to convince you that Monsieur de Carnoël is innocent. On the second occasion the casket was taken by a single man, the same who accompanied my friend on the expedition in which she lost her hand. I know this man, and I swear that no one helped him, that he alone took the casket, and was even ignorant of the existence of Monsieur de Carnoël."

"But then, how did Monsieur de Carnoël happen to possess the fifty thousand francs which were unquestionably taken from the safe? Vignory has called our attention to the fact that the packages of notes were fastened in a peculiar fashion, and he is certain that he pinned them himself."

"Monsieur Vignory is either mistaken or he lies."

"My uncle would hardly be willing to admit that, if the question were submitted to him."

"He would admit it, I suppose, if my friend appeared before him to confirm the statement I have just made to you."

"I doubt it; and, besides, she could not do that without confessing her own guilt."

"You mean without confessing that she had conspired against the oppressors of her country. Why should she shrink from such an avowal? Far from concealing the fact, she glories in it."

"But if Monsieur de Carnoël is innocent, what prevents him from appearing in his own defence?"

"He would have done so already if my friend had not prevented it."

"Your friend? What! has he taken refuge in her house, then?"

"Necessarily. Where else could he go after the scene of last night? Justine conducted him to the house of her protector, and he is still there?"

"That is quite natural. But the refuge is ill chosen for a man who desires to clear himself of an accusation of theft, for the house that shelters him belongs to the person who tried to open the safe, and who afterwards succeeded in doing so through one of her accomplices. One can't help feeling that these persons understand each other remarkably well."

"My friend will ask Monsieur Dorgères to question all the parties who have been in any way connected with the affair. They will unanimously declare that Monsieur de Carnoël was absolutely ignorant of the plot; and as they will be obliged to accuse themselves to vindicate him, their sincerity cannot be doubted."

"Ah, well, let him come forward, then, and plead his own cause, if he has no reason to reproach himself. I don't know whether he will succeed; but in any case he has but little to lose."

"And if he had everything to lose he would not hesitate, I am certain."

"Then you have seen him?"

"Yes, at my friend's house. She knew that I was interested in him, and did not lose a moment in informing me of what had occurred."

"Then he intends to go to my uncle?" asked Maxime, timidly.

"He will go to-day," replied Madame Yalta, without the slightest hesitation. "And I shall go with him, and I rely upon your assistance. Your presence seems to me indispensable."

"I am at your service; but my situation will be anything but pleasant. I have just assured my uncle that his former secretary was guilty; and I did even more. I solemnly assured my cousin, swore it upon my honour, that Robert de Carnoël was unworthy of her."

"You spoke according to your honest conviction; you will speak differently now that you have had more information on the subject; and your cousin will believe you, for you have never concealed your opinion."

"Possibly; but I very much doubt if my uncle will allow us to see her."

"I have foreseen that, and have already made arrangements for an interview with your cousin. I sent her a note about an hour ago, telling her that I had complete proofs of Monsieur de Carnoël's innocence, and requesting her to come here at once. After a short conversation with her I shall return with her to her father, and he will be obliged to see us."

Maxime knew Alice, and felt sure that she would eagerly clutch at this last hope, and find a way to see the stranger who promised to restore to her the lover of her choice. He was aroused from his reflections by a faint noise, as if some one were stealthily approaching through the shrubbery. Madame Yalta, absorbed in thought, appeared to notice nothing. Soon a white hand parted the leaves, a face appeared between the camellia bushes, and Maxime rose, uttering a cry of surprise. He had recognised the face which had just gleamed through the foliage for an instant like a ray of sunshine, only to vanish at once. "It is she!" he exclaimed. "The beauty of the rink—the woman who rescued Carnoël!"

Madame Yalta started. Evidently she had not expected this interruption, and considered it inopportune; but she soon recovered from her slight discomfiture, and called: "Justine!"

The branches were again parted, and the brunette with the olive skin reappeared. She was as beautiful as ever, but she had changed her attire. The skater of the rink, the fashionable lady of the opera, was clad as became a waiting-maid. The butterfly had once more become a chrysalis. The strange creature advanced deliberately, and displayed no surprise on seeing Maxime, who looked at her with an astonishment bordering on stupefaction. "What has happened?" inquired the countess.

"The lady madame was expecting has arrived, and is waiting in the boudoir."

"Monsieur Villagos has not come?"

"Not yet; but a box has arrived from him. Madame will find it on the table in her sleeping-room."

"Very well; you may retire."

Justine bowed, and instantly withdrew.

Maxime sat silent and motionless, with his eyes fixed inquiringly upon Madame Yalta, whom he did not dare to question; but she spared him the necessity of doing so, by saying:

"This girl has just told me that Mademoiselle Dorgères is here. Will you see her?"

"But I do not know that I ought," stammered the young man.

"Yes, it would be better for you to be present at our interview."

"I am ready to do whatever you wish, only that woman, the brunette, the thief's accomplice—the person you call Justine——"

"Is my waiting-maid," the countess interrupted, coldly. "Come, I say. There is no time to lose; moments are precious." And curtailing all further explanations, she rose to leave the conservatory.

Maxime followed her without a word. He was in a state of indescribable agitation. "Her waiting-maid!" he thought. "This creature who stole the braclet from me is in her service, as well as the gardener, and likewise the fencing-master. And she has just given me to understand that all these persons were implicated in the robbery. Am I, then, to suppose that *she* ordered them to commit it?"

Meanwhile Madame Yalta walked on with head erect, and with a tranquil face and steady eyes. Without exchanging a word, they crossed the park, where they encountered no one, and reached a door of the cottage which Maxime had never before seen. Then the countess conducted him to the first floor, into the room where he had seen the tall canopied bedstead the day before. "Mademoiselle Dorgères is there," the countess said, pointing to the hanging of Gobelin tapestry that concealed the entrance to the boudoir. "Don't you think it would be advisable for you to see her first, and prepare her for what I have to impart?"

"No," replied Maxime, "she thinks I have taken sides against Robert de Carnoël, and she would not listen to me. She only has confidence in you now, and she distrusts me."

"You are right; let us go in together."

As the countess spoke her eyes fell upon a box of peculiar form—wider at the top than at the bottom—and covered with a lid, which was standing on a table in the centre of the room.

"That is undoubtedly the box Dr. Villagos has sent," remarked Maxime, forcing a smile.

Madame Yalta hastily approached the table, and opened this strange box, not unlike a coffin in form, and made of rough pine wood, and from it she drew a bunch of *immortelles*. "A strange present, truly," murmured Maxime.

The countess did not reply, but the flowers dropped from her fingers, and he noticed that she turned pale. "I was expecting it," she murmured.

"For whom does Dr. Villagos intend this ridiculous present?"

"The bouquet is for me. By sending it Villagos gives me to understand that sentence of death has been passed upon me, for I am condemned."

"Condemned by this scoundrel Villagos?"

"By the Nihilists, of whom he is a leader, and who accuse me of having betrayed them."

"You?"

"I connected myself with them. I deserve my fate."

Maxime was about to protest, when the maid whom he had seen on his previous visits hastily entered, and proceeding straight to the countess, addressed her in a language he did not understand. The colloquy was very short, and the maid left the room at a gesture from the countess, who, turning to Maxime, said peremptorily: "Ask me for no explanations. The conversation you are about to hear will reveal all. Enter the boudoir where Mademoiselle Dorgères is awaiting me, and request her to listen with you. In a few moments she will have proofs that Monsieur de Car-

noël is innocent. Now, not another word ; you must not be found here. Go in, I tell you ! ”

“ Swear to me that you do not incur any danger ! ”

“ None, at the present moment. You need not close the door, and by concealing yourself behind the tapestry you will not lose a word that is spoken here. ”

“ And if you require any assistance, I shall be there, ” murmured Maxime. He realised that, in spite of everything, he passionately loved this strange woman who now rebelled against the Nihilists, after having been associated with them in their dark deeds. The partial disclosures made by her had, however, plunged him into a state of indescribable perplexity, and he longed to know the whole truth.

He had scarcely disappeared behind the tapestry hanging when M. Villagos entered the room. He wore his most imposing air ; he was as grave as a judge, and an ominous light gleamed in his eyes. But the countess did not flinch on seeing him advance slowly towards her. “ You have apprised me of the sentence that has just been passed upon me, ” she said, in a voice that did not tremble. “ What do you desire of me ? ”

“ I desire to question you. ”

“ Of what use is that, since I am already condemned ? ”

“ You have accomplices ; I wish to know them. You have betrayed us ; all traitors must be punished. ”

“ When I know of what I am accused, I will see if it suits me to reply. ”

“ You are accused of having endangered the success of our plans by your imprudence. In the name of the Central Committee I forbade you to interest yourself in the Frenchman suspected of the theft committed at Monsieur Dorgères’ bank. You paid no heed to this order. You not only enlisted another Frenchman in the attempt to discover Monsieur de Carnoël, but you availed yourself of the services of our own members—of subordinates whom we had initiated into our secrets, and who had been working for us a long time. Your fencing-master, Kardiki, and your waiting-maid, Justine, have played a part in a plot, the object of which was to free a stranger, who, to prove his own innocence, could not fail to designate the real culprits. Even supposing he does not know them yet, he would ultimately do so if I allowed you to live. You cannot prove his innocence without denouncing us. ”

“ Without denouncing myself you mean. You are right. I propose to tell Monsieur Dorgères and his daughter the true history of the theft. I shall tell them by whom it was committed, and with what object ; and they will believe me, for I shall show them unanswerable proof. I see fit to add that I shall mention only myself. ”

“ I no longer have confidence in your discretion ; but I wish to ask you why you turn against us after having served us so faithfully and well ? ”

“ Because I will no longer have anything in common with the assassins who have just blown up the Winter Palace, ” said the countess, looking straight at Villagos.

“ This is a reply which I little expected, ” said the doctor, shrugging his shoulders, “ and your scruples come rather late in the day. When you took an oath to struggle with us against tyranny you were not ignorant that we were resolved to employ fire and the sword to destroy it. ”

“ I dreamed of an insurrection against the Russian Government, ” replied the countess, proudly. “ I did not expect you would stoop to

assassination, or that you would destroy the lives of brave soldiers in order to reach the Czar. I knew that there had been murders committed by some of your number; but I believed these isolated crimes were not the result of a system, but had been committed by men driven by desperation. The news that arrived from St. Petersburg this morning has opened my eyes. You can kill me, but you cannot force me to remain among you."

"So you have decided to sacrifice yourself for the sake of a Frenchman whom you scarcely know. You wish to appear in the part of a redresser of wrongs; but, to be consistent, you should go over to the Russians, and betray us all."

"Enough!" interrupted the countess, haughtily. "I shall not dispute my life with you, but I forbid you to insult me. You have no right to do so; my past speaks for me. I am the daughter of a man who died in Siberia, where the Russians had sent him for taking up arms in defence of Poland. It was to free my country that I allied myself with you; and the brave people, whom I led into a complicity with you, for which I blush, had no other aim. Kardiki had served his country, and believed he was still doing so by executing my orders. Justine is a Parisian, but her father and her husband are Poles. Georget, the brave lad who risked his liberty and his life for me, is the grandson of a Frenchman who died fighting in the ranks of the Polish army, and she who shared his perils, and who married him during the great insurrection of 1831, was born the Countess Wielenska. She has sacrificed everything for her country—her rank, name, and fortune; and, during the forty years she has been living in the humble position to which our disasters have reduced her, she has not ceased to labour for the deliverance of her country. Do you think this noble woman will consent to serve any longer the cowards who stoop to assassination to attain their ends?"

"She allowed her grandson to assist them to steal," replied the doctor.

"It was I whom he aided in an effort to regain papers which compromised hundreds of my countrymen. It was I whom he obeyed, for it was I who had devoted myself to the accomplishment of an act which I regarded as a duty; and I need not remind you what it cost me."

"Yes, I know you have displayed great heroism, and I ask myself what madness has induced you to forsake our party after serving it so bravely and skilfully. Ever since the terrible adventure which cost you so dearly, you have achieved wonders. The hand stolen from the Morgue by Kardiki, the bracelet recovered by Justine, all these operations were planned and conducted by you; and not the slightest trace remained of an accident which might have ruined us. And yet you suddenly take it into your head to revive the whole matter, and in defiance of all warnings you enter upon a war with your friends, and destroy all that it has cost so much to achieve. Can you explain the cause of this sudden revulsion of feeling?"

"The cause? There is none except the desire to save an innocent man. When I learned from Monsieur Maxime Dorgères that Monsieur de Carnoël was accused of having stolen the casket, I swore to repair the wrong I had unintentionally done to him and his betrothed."

"Very well; you admit that you have compromised us all by your sentimental folly. It is an unpardonable crime. I may, however, decide to forgive you, on two conditions."

"Spare yourself the trouble of announcing them; I shall not submit to them."

"The first," resumed the imperturbable doctor, "is that you consent to leave France, never to return. As regards the second—Monsieur de Carnoël was conducted to your house by Justine and Kardiki last night. Very well, if you desire to live you must surrender this man to me to-day—instantly."

"Deliver Monsiennr de Carnoël up to yon?" said the countess, with a disdainful smile; "to be assassinated, no doubt?"

"He, too, is condemned. Whatever you may do, he will not escape the fate he deserves."

"And it is to me you dare to propose such an infamous and cowardly act! I thought you knew me better."

"So you refuse?" The countess did not take the trouble to reply, but pulled the bell-rope, and motioned the doctor to the door. "Very well," he resumed, drily, "you dismiss me. I shall not return, and you will never see me again, for in a fortnight hence you will be dead. One word only: know that all those who have assisted you, all those who have received your confidence are irrevocably doomed. Your treachery will not save them. Farewell, countess, I shall regret your death, for you might have served our cause powerfully, and you are to die the death of a traitor; but you would have it so."

After he had uttered this threatening farewell, Villagos turned on his heels and proceeded to the door. Kardiki, summoned by the bell, was awaiting him there. The Russian Nihilist and the Pole exchanged a by no means friendly glance, and Madame Yalta's faithful servant followed the enemy to prevent any offensive return. Scarcely had they disappeared, than Maxime lifted the curtain that had concealed him during this exciting conversation. The countess went straight towards him, and saw Mademoiselle Dorgères standing behind her cousin. Alice, pale and trembling, had not strength to utter a single word, but Maxime exclaimed: "We have heard all!"

"Then you know that I am about to die," said the countess, with a melancholy smile.

"Die! It is that wretch who shall die! I will take it upon myself to send him into the next world with a good sword thrust."

"No, you shall not stake your life against that of an assassin. What matters it if I die, since you can no longer doubt the innocence of Monsieur de Carnoël!"

"Alice doubts it no more than I; and my uncle will be compelled to yield to the evidence. There will be an explosion, no doubt, but I wish to lead Robert de Carnoël back to the house he left, poor and proud. I wish him to re-enter it with head erect. He is here, is he not?"

"Yes," replied the countess, "and I claim the honour of presenting him to Monsieur Dorgères. It is my right to repair the injury that I have done him."

"But," began Maxime, with some embarrassment, "I don't know if my uncle will consent——"

"To receive me. You must prepare him for the interview. You must go and tell him what you have just learned. I have nothing more to conceal. It matters little now that people should know that I have degraded myself by an alliance with scoundrels. I defy their threats. I defy them so heartily that I am going to ask Monsieur Dorgères to proclaim my story and theirs everywhere."

"That would be a grave imprudence, and I entreat you not to commit

it. Why expose yourself to such terrible dangers? It is enough that Robert de Carnoël should be completely vindicated; and he will be. I am going to announce your visit to my uncle, but this matter must not be allowed to proceed further."

The countess gazed inquiringly at Mademoiselle Dorgères, and fancied she read doubt and hesitation in the young girl's eyes. "Will you forgive me?" Madame Yalta asked, in a trembling voice. "Will you forgive me for having made you suffer so much?" Alice could not reply; she was weeping. "Yes, I have been cruel," the countess resumed. "When I first heard that your betrothed was accused I ought to have confessed before you, and before your father, that I was the only culprit. My silence was a crime; and I am ready to atone for it. I do not offer you my life; it is no longer at my disposal, for the assassins are about to take it; but I can, if you demand it, surrender myself to the authorities of your country. I consent to publicly declare that I have been the accomplice of these wretches, and that in order to serve them I committed an infamous action."

"You, madame?" faltered the trembling Alice.

"Do you doubt it? Then you cannot have heard what I said to that man a moment ago. Did you not understand that I myself attempted to commit the theft? Do you still refuse to believe me? Ah, well! look!" exclaimed the countess.

Madame Yalta stepped forward and raised a black curtain, which concealed a small niche in the wall of the boudoir. Alice uttered a cry of horror and averted her eyes. She had previously raised this curtain, and knew what it concealed; she had raised it on the day she entered the boudoir to avoid a meeting with Maxime, who had called to see Madame Yalta. "Yes, look," repeated the countess, in a voice that vibrated strangely; "look at this severed hand!"

"Then it was you!" murmured Maxime.

"Had you not discovered it?" she asked, extending her left arm, which was provided with an artificial hand. The conversation Maxime had just heard had left no room for doubt, and, besides, he recollected that he had never seen Madame Yalta ungloved. She had fenced in gloves, she had driven in gloves, and when she had received him reclining on a divan or in bed her hands had not been visible. He understood all now; there was no more mystery.

"Yes," resumed Madame Yalta, "I submitted without a murmur to the terrible operation. I thought I was shedding my blood for my country, and it cost me less to give it than it did to consent to the machinations of Villagos. It was he who first thought of utilising the remarkable beauty of Justine to draw you into a snare. It was he who, after the failure of her first attempt, conceived the plan of bringing you to the house in the hope that I might succeed in an undertaking in which Justine had failed. It nearly cost me my life, for I was scarcely able to sit up, and the part I was obliged to play caused a frightful relapse. But what did my life matter to him, provided he could destroy all trace of my co-operation in the theft? He feared that if I was detected suspicion would fall upon him. He did not think you would tell me that Monsieur de Carnoël was accused, or that I should interest myself in an innocent man. Had he foreseen this, he would have taken good care not to bring you here. The day he discovered that I was resolved to find Monsieur de Carnoël, he turned against me. He declared war upon me, but a secret

war. He watched me ; he set spies upon my people. Still, we succeeded in outwitting him, and in delivering Monsieur de Carnoël ; but when he learned that the prisoner was free, and that the mystery was about to be cleared up, he threw aside the mask and announced my sentence."

"He has forgotten that you have friends to defend you. This condemnation is only a gloomy joke."

"Let us speak of your affairs," said the countess, turning to Alice, instead of answering Maxime—"let us speak of your betrothed. He is the noblest, the proudest, the most generous of men. Even if I had no wrongs to redress, I would joyfully sacrifice myself for the pleasure of restoring him to you. Forgive me for delaying the moment of your meeting. Monsieur Dorgères must be present when I bring Monsieur de Carnoël to you."

Alice was still too much agitated to reply ; but Maxime signified his approval by a gesture, and Madame Yalta said to him quickly :

"Go, take Mademoiselle Dorgères back to her father, and prepare him to receive me. Don't lose an instant. What I am able to do to-day. I shall perhaps be powerless to do to-morrow. My hours are numbered."

Maxime did not notice this allusion to the threats uttered by Villagos. He was engrossed in another idea, and he replied, shaking his head : "My uncle will listen to nothing as long as the source from which Carnoël derived the fifty thousand francs found upon him remains unexplained."

"Some enemy sent the money to ruin him," replied the countess, quickly. "It may have been Villagos. He has enormous sums at his disposal, and he is capable of any act of infamy. The letter that Monsieur de Carnoël received is in Villagos's handwriting, perhaps. I will see it. You will investigate the matter, and we will prove, I am sure, that the sending of this money was an atrocious plot—but I entreat you to act at once. In two hours I shall be at your uncle's," she added, offering her right hand to Alice, who burst into tears.

Maxime felt that any further explanation would be useless, and thought it advisable to end the scene as quickly as possible. "Come," he said to his cousin, who followed him from the room.

XVIII.

MAXIME, on leaving the house of the countess with Alice, resolved to approach his uncle frankly, and, with his cousin's aid, to make a vigorous attack upon him. Alice, eager to assist him, encouraged him in this bold design, and Madame Yalta had promised to appear at the critical moment, and ensure a victory. However, on reaching the Rue de Suresnes, Maxime found that M. Dorgères had just gone out, and would not return for an hour. The young man decided to employ the time at his disposal in preparing for a decisive battle. He thought, moreover, that he had a duty to perform before engaging in the struggle.

It was against Vignory that he was about to enter upon a campaign, and Vignory had been his most intimate friend. It is true that their friendship had been less warm of late, on account of circumstances independent of their own inclination, but Maxime felt that he could not plead M. de Carnoël's cause without first warning Vignory. He hoped that a frank confession would not estrange him completely from his old comrade. He knew him thoroughly ; he knew that good sense was his chief characteristic,

and that he looked on life from a practical point of view ; moreover, to sweeten the pill he would be compelled to swallow, Maxime counted upon convincing him that a forced marriage could not be a happy one, and that it would be better for him to give Alice up of his own free will, and content himself with being M. Dorgères' partner. So, while preparing the arguments he wished to advance, he turned his steps towards the Rue d'Aguesseau, where Vignory lived.

It was Sunday, and no doubt Vignory had not yet gone out. However, Maxime had scarcely proceeded twenty paces when he perceived Georget coming towards him. The lad was transfigured. He had laid aside his office livery, and had donned an elegant jacket, velvet breeches, and grey hat. He walked with his head high in the air, and both hands in his pockets ; his eyes were bright, and his lips smiling. "You are cured, then ?" asked Maxime, stopping him.

"So entirely that it seems to me I have never been ill," replied Georget. "I have already played ball with my broken arm, and my memory has returned. Isn't that fortunate ? You must have found me stupid enough ; but that's all over now ; I know what I am saying, and remember everything."

"Then I shan't let you go, my boy. There are many things you must explain to me. Where are you going at such a pace ?"

"I am going to explain to Monsieur Dorgères that I told the persons who took the casket how to open the safe."

"I suspected as much. Did you come to confess to my uncle of your own accord ?"

"No ; my grandmother sent me."

Maxime began to understand. The countess must have gone early in the morning to announce M. de Carnoël's deliverance to Madame Piriac, and to give her the consequent instructions.

"And are you not afraid your former employer will have you arrested ?"

"If he does I shall go to prison without complaining ; but I hope Mademoiselle Alice will persuade her father to forgive me."

"I don't know how he will receive your confession. Was it to soften his heart that you dressed yourself up in such fine style ?"

"Oh, no, Monsieur Maxime. It was the countess who brought me these clothes. She is going to take me away with her, my grandmother and me this evening. I shall be sorry to go, because I shan't see you any more."

Maxime felt that this was no time to insist upon an explanation of this sudden departure ; he must see Vignory, and it would not do to lose sight of Georget. "Come with me," he said to the lad. "My uncle isn't at home, but he will soon return and we will see him together. In the meantime we will take a walk."

"With pleasure."

The Rue d'Aguesseau was not far off, and the short walk was made in silence. On reaching the door of Vignory's house they found the porter engaged in conversation with a tall young man who bowed to Maxime. "You don't recognise me," he remarked. "Still it is not long since we met. It was I who personated the chanticleer in the Rue Jouffroy."

"Oh, yes, I recollect," murmured Maxime, surprised at this meeting.

"Agénor Galopardin, book-keeper and member of the Society of the Children of Apollo. I just called to see my ex-comrade, Jules Vignory. I say *ex*, because he has neglected me a little for a couple of months. Still,

this morning, he sends a messenger requesting me to call on him. I intended to go to St. Ouen with my friend Falot, but I sacrifice my holiday and hasten to obey the summons. However, no Vignory is to be found; he has gone out."

"I, too, came to see him, and am greatly annoyed to find that he is not at home."

"So he plays you false, too! Ah, wealth makes a great change in men. Vignory wasn't so proud two months ago, when he came to the café to find me one evening, and to ask a favour of me. He had confidence in me then, for he asked my aid in a very delicate matter—an anonymous restitution."

"What! What do you mean by that?" inquired Maxime, eagerly.

"Oh, it was a very simple matter. Fifty thousand francs that one of Dorgères' depositors owed to a gentleman, and which he wished to return without giving his name. Between ourselves, I have always thought he had stolen the money."

"And Vignory requested you to deliver the money?"

"Yes; I am not rich, but I am honest, and I faithfully delivered the package at the house of the gentleman, who lived on the Boulevard des Batignolles. I even wrote the accompanying letter. It seems that the debtor did not wish his creditor to know where the bank notes came from, and that this creditor was familiar with Vignory's handwriting. It was for this reason that Vignory applied to me. He even promised me that the gentleman would make me a handsome present, but I have never seen it."

Maxime was pale with emotion, and, in truth, he had cause to be greatly agitated. He learned at the same time that Robert de Carnoël was innocent, and that Jules Vignory had been guilty of an infamous act. "Would you recognise the letter you wrote?" he inquired.

"At Vignory's dictation? Perfectly. He would recognise it, too. I didn't change a single word in writing it."

"Then come with me."

"Where, if I may be allowed to inquire?"

"To Monsieur Dorgères, my uncle. He desires to thank you."

"I should like nothing better. Still, if this is likely to arouse Vignory's displeasure——"

"Come, sir, come and perform a worthy act. I assure you that you will be rewarded."

Galopardin allowed himself to be persuaded, and walked off with Maxime, who had taken his arm. Georget had listened in silence, but one could see by his face that he understood everything.

They returned to the Rue de Suresnes, and when about two hundred paces from the banker's house, Maxime perceived Vignory approaching from the opposite direction. He was hastening towards him when Vignory also recognised the party, and turning abruptly, hastened away at the top of his speed. "Well, that is altogether too much!" exclaimed Galopardin. "This gentleman runs away now when he sees us. He is afraid he will be obliged to confess that he once frequented the society of a poor devil like me. He is ashamed of me. Very good; I will pay him back some day or other."

"Yes," exclaimed Maxime, "he is anxious to avoid us. He has guessed my object on seeing us arm-in-arm together. Let us make haste, I beg of you. I haven't a moment to lose in presenting you to my uncle."

Galopardin was now not very amicably disposed towards his former friend, and he followed Maxime without troubling himself any further respecting the consequences which the presentation might have for the ungrateful Vignory.

Father Denlevant opened his eyes in astonishment on beholding Georget in his new garb, but his surprise did not prevent him from telling Maxime that M. Dorgères had just returned, and was in his office. Just then a carriage drew up before the gateway, and the good man's astonishment changed into stupefaction when he saw Robert de Carnoël alight and offer his hand to the Countess Yalta, so as to assist her out of the vehicle. It was no place for an explanation; Maxime bowed to the countess, pressed Robert's hand in silence, and said in a low voice: "My uncle is going to receive us. I have no doubt of our success. Georget will aid us, and Providence has brought me a person who can furnish conclusive evidence," he added, pointing to the book-keeper, who was leaning against the wall.

"Let us go in," said Madame Yalta, quietly. She was very pale, less pale, however, than Carnoël, whose face bore traces of the long hours of agony he had endured during his captivity; but she advanced with a firm step, and Colonel Borisoff's prisoner had lost none of his pride. It was evident that they had not come to ask forgiveness, but justice. Maxime had the resolute air of a captain who is leading his soldiers to battle. The little procession ascended the main staircase without meeting any one, and was ushered by Georget into the reception room connected with the banker's private office. This room was empty, but the banker was not alone, for one could hear his voice raised to an unwonted pitch. The critical moment had arrived, and Maxime did not hesitate. "Sir," he said turning to the book-keeper, who was beginning to feel exceedingly ill at ease, "I am sure you are an honourable man, and I count upon your aid in this emergency. The honour of one of my friends is at stake, and I beg that you will remain here with this lad until I call you."

Without further preamble, Maxime then opened the door of the office, stepped aside to allow the countess who had not relinquished her hold on Robert's arm, to pass in, and entered immediately after her. Alice, who was sobbing in an arm-chair, rose to her feet; M. Dorgères, who was talking excitedly, turned and uttered a cry of indignation on perceiving the visitors his nephew had brought in. He would certainly have given full vent to his rage if only his former secretary had been present; but he controlled himself, not so much out of respect for the countess as out of regard for his daughter, who was in a state of intense nervous excitement which might result in a fit of hysterics at any moment.

In order to vent his anger on some one, he chose Maxime. "Why do you venture to bring me persons who have no business here?" he inquired, harshly.

"My dear uncle, you will soon thank me for what I have done," replied his nephew, not in the least disconcerted.

"Thank you! You are mocking me."

"Sir," began the countess, "I beg that you will listen to me."

"It is useless, madame; I know what you are going to say. My daughter has told me, and I don't believe a single word of the romance you have invented. As for the man who dares to present himself in my house after I have ordered him from it, I am resolved not to tolerate his presence," he added, advancing towards Carnoël.

The latter started, and was about to reply in a manner which would have put an end to all further attempts at reconciliation, when his eyes met those of Alice, and he held his peace. This proud silence only exasperated M. Dorgères the more, and he resumed, in an even sharper tone, "This is too great a display of impudence, and it is time to put an end to it. To you, madame, I will say that my daughter has just repeated the story you have told her. You declare, it seems, that you attempted to break open my safe. You are at liberty to boast of an act for which you should blush, but don't hope to persuade me that my ex-secretary was not your accomplice. I have no desire to pursue him; I even desire to forget your inexcusable conduct, but I absolutely refuse to listen to any of your explanations. They will not exonerate the man you persist in defending. That *you* only desired Colonel Borisoff's papers is very possible, but Monsieur de Carnoël took fifty thousand francs from me. The pretended letter is evidence against him. It was fabricated in his defence, and I defy him to find the so-called debtor who wrote it. Let him bring him here! The letter is there, upon my table."

"Do you really wish to see the writer?" inquired Maxime, quietly approaching the door. "He is in your waiting-room, and with or without your permission I am going to call him." And partially opening the door, Maxime put out his head. "Be so kind as to step in here a moment," he said to the book-keeper, who was seated beside Georget upon one of the benches. "My uncle desires to speak with you."

Galopardin, thus forced to appear before this imposing company, felt little inclined to imitate the chanticleer. He made a comprehensive bow, twirled his hat between his fingers, and opened his eyes in an affrighted manner. "Who are you?" M. Dorgères asked, harshly.

"Galopardin," stammered the clerk. "Agénor Galopardin, book-keeper in the establishment of Monsieur Charoule, a coal merchant of the Rue de Flandres. If you desire any information respecting me, my employer will tell you——"

"I know your employer, but that is not the question. What is your business here?"

"I—I do not know——"

"I know," said Maxime. "Come forward, my dear fellow. Look at that paper upon my uncle's desk."

Galopardin mechanically obeyed, but as soon as he took the letter in his hand, he exclaimed: "Why, this is the very letter I wrote!"

"You!" exclaimed the banker, "you wrote that! Come, we will see if you are telling the truth. Here is a pen and ink. Copy the first sentence."

Galopardin thought it possible that the banker, before offering him a situation in his establishment, wished to see if he wrote a good hand, and so he began to write with great care. He had not copied a dozen words before M. Dorgères snatched the paper from him, and pointing to Robert de Carnoël, exclaimed: "Enough! I am satisfied. So it was you who acted as that gentleman's amanuensis?"

"No; I am not acquainted with him," stammered Galopardin.

By the manner in which the book-keeper and M. de Carnoël looked at each other, the banker saw that they had met for the first time, and he began to change his tone. "Then you will tell me who dictated this letter, I suppose?" he remarked.

"Very willingly, sir," replied Galopardin. "It was Jules Vignory, your cashier."

"You lie!"

"I swear that I don't. Vignory was my friend, and came one evening to the Café Cardinet to bring me a draft of this letter, and ask me to copy it; he pretended that he came from you——"

"What! he dared—but it is impossible! Vignory is an honest man, and you would not repeat what you are saying in his presence."

"Excuse me, sir, but I am ready to do so at any time, and if you will send for him, I assure you he will not attempt to deny the truth of my assertions."

This reply was made with such an air of frankness that it greatly disturbed the convictions of M. Dorgères, who remained evidently embarrassed.

"What do you think of the situation now, my dear uncle?" Maxime asked, quietly.

"I think that all this is perhaps a conspiracy, which has been planned amongst you, and that until I have questioned Vignory——"

He did not complete the sentence, for the door opened and Georget burst in, just in time to draw upon himself the displeasure of M. Dorgères, who exclaimed: "What brought you here, you young rascal?"

"Why did you come in before you were called?" asked Maxime, who had been reserving the appearance of the page for the close of the interview.

"Do you know that I ought to summon a policeman to take you to prison?" continued the banker. "My daughter has told me all. You aided the rogues who opened my safe with a false key. You are a thief."

"Yes," replied the boy, quietly, "if it is stealing to aid brave people to recover papers which a spy intended to use to effect their ruin; and if you think I deserve imprisonment have me arrested."

"But I forbade you to enter without my permission," interposed Maxime.

"You must not be angry with me, Monsieur Maxime. Monsieur Vignory sent me."

"What! Monsieur Vignory? Are you losing your mind?"

"He rushed in like a madman, handed me this letter, and ordered me to take it to Monsieur Dorgères immediately, after which he hastened away."

"A letter!" exclaimed the banker, "a letter from Vignory! Give it to me, boy!"

Georget obeyed. The banker broke the seal with a trembling hand. Every one present understood that the finish had come, and there was a breathless silence. As the banker perused the letter, they could read on his face the feelings excited by its contents. He turned visibly paler, his features contracted, and soon two big tears rolled down his cheeks. At last, however, he raised his head, and said, in a voice husky with emotion, "Listen."

"'Monsieur,'" writes Jules Vignory, 'this is my confession. You doubtless already know that I have committed a dastardly act, for I have just met the friend who unconsciously aided me in the commission of it. Your nephew was with him; Georget was following them; and I saw them enter your house. I realised they were going to tell you what I had done. There only remains for me to leave France never to return, and by this evening I shall be far from Paris. I have deserved my fate; I do not complain; and though I write to you it is not to exculpate myself; but, perhaps, after you have read my full confession, you will censure me less

severely. The day Monsieur Borisoff came to reclaim his casket, I reached the office some moments in advance of him, and found the safe open. I had before reproached myself for not having warned you of the first attempt at robbery; and when I saw that the thieves had repeated the attempt and succeeded, I lost my senses to such an extent that on stating there was a deficit of fifty thousand francs, I quite forgot that the evening before I had laid aside five packages of bank-notes to pay a draft. The money was in the drawer of my desk, where I found it three days afterwards.

“I had not accused Robert, who had honoured me with his friendship, but I had suspected him. When I laid my hand upon the missing money my first emotion was one of joy. I was glad to be able to prove that my friend had been unjustly accused, and to do so I had only to bring you the money. Unfortunately you were absent from the office at the time. I did not succeed in obtaining an interview with you during the evening, and was compelled to postpone the restitution until the next day.

“This confession would cost me a great deal, for you had a right to reproach me for my carelessness. A cashier who leaves fifty thousand francs in a drawer is guilty of inexcusable negligence. An evil thought then occurred to me. I had sometimes ventured to think of myself as your future partner and son-in-law. It was only a dream; but you had manifested so much interest in me that the dream did not seem an impossibility. Still, I had spoken to no one of the hopes I secretly cherished, and I had resigned myself to loving Mademoiselle Dorgères in silence, for I did love her with an entirely disinterested love, and had often wished that she were poor, in order that I might openly aspire to her hand. I had suffered all the more from the fact that she was already secretly betrothed to Robert de Carnoël, my comrade and friend.

“However, Robert had gone away swearing that he meant to expatriate himself, and that we should never see him again. The barrier which had separated Mademoiselle Dorgères and myself had disappeared; and I carried my folly so far as to believe that perhaps she would forget the absent one and deign to accept my devotion. But the day after I discovered the missing money I received a letter from Carnoël, informing me that after a short visit to Brittany he had returned to Paris, where he would remain several days before starting for America, and that he intended to try and obtain an interview with Mademoiselle Dorgères. He told me where he lived, and asked to see me. This letter overwhelmed me with consternation, for I felt that Carnoël would have but little difficulty in proving his innocence as soon as he found an opportunity to explain. Despair seized me, and jealousy suggested a villainous thought.

“I did not wish to keep the money I had found, and I dreaded to return it to you for fear of receiving richly-deserved reproaches. You had no expectation of recovering it, and the loss of fifty thousand francs affected you little. I conceived the plan of sending it to Carnoël, pretending it was an act of restitution. I said to myself that this money would enable him to live in a foreign land, and perhaps even to make a fortune there, and that I should atone for my fault by saving from poverty the friend whose flight left the way open for the realisation of my ambition. I told myself this, trying to deceive myself, and to conceal from my own eyes the base motive that prompted me, for in my secret heart I had but one object: to ruin Robert de Carnoël irretrievably in case he decided to re-appear. I knew that Monsieur Borisoff was seeking

him, that if he succeeded in discovering him he would find upon him the amount which was missing from the safe; that you would be instantly informed of this discovery; and that Mademoiselle Dorgères would no longer think of marrying a man who was dishonoured.

“‘It was a shameful, cowardly, and infamous scheme, and I thank God, who has baffled it by revealing it to you through the efforts of your nephew. Now you know all. I am ignorant of what has become of Robert de Carnoël, but I earnestly hope my confession will arrive in time to prevent an act of atrocious injustice. I no longer have a right to swear upon my honour, but I have no interest in deceiving you now that I am about to disappear for ever, and I solemnly declare that Robert is innocent. Colonel Borisoff’s casket was stolen by his personal enemies, and the only member of the household who aided them was Georget. I have finished. There now only remains for me to humbly implore, not that you will forgive me, for that I do not deserve, but that you will forget me. Farewell, you who have overwhelmed me with kindness. Farewell, all you whom I have loved; I depart, and you will never hear of me again. May happiness attend you all; adieu, and implore God to show mercy to one who is desperate.’”

This was all, and it was enough. M. Dorgères offered his hand to Robert de Carnoël, and opened his arms to his daughter. Maxime, who never shed tears, wept and looked at Madame Yalta. Georget leaped for joy, and Galopardin smiled to keep him company.

Suddenly, however, the countess staggered and turned pale. Maxime sprang forward to support her. “It is over,” she murmured; “the wretch has poisoned me.” And, so saying, she fell to the ground.

They all of them darted to raise her, but their tender cares proved unavailing. Her beautiful eyes never opened again. She was dead.

* * * * *

A month has elapsed since the catastrophe that ended this strange drama so gloomily. Alice and Robert are not yet married. They both wear mourning for the noble woman who had re-united them, but their wedding-day is fixed; it will be in the month of May.

The death of the countess has not been avenged, for Villagos disappeared the day of the crime, and all trace of him has been lost. Maxime certainly set out in pursuit of him, but the doctor had taken his precautions in advance, and all efforts to discover his whereabouts have proved unavailing. It was ascertained, however, that he had poured the poison into a glass of water prepared for the countess, who probably apprehended a speedy death, for she had made her will only the evening before.

She had forgotten none of those who had served her faithfully, or loved her. Madame Piriac, Georget, Kardiki, Justine and her husband, all received large legacies, to be paid from the estate by Robert de Carnoël, who was appointed universal legatee. To Maxime Dorgères Madame Yalta bequeathed a bracelet and a ring more precious to him than all the riches of the world, for they are all that is left him of a woman but slightly known, though passionately loved. The memory of the countess will never be effaced from the heart of Maxime, who is not yet consoled, and who is planning a journey round the world in the hope that it will help to cure him of the effects of the violent shock he received. Perhaps, in some

distant land, he will meet Jules Vignory, expiating a moment's weakness by a life of toil, for the repentant culprit kept his word and sailed from Havre only a few hours after writing his confession.

Robert de Carnoël accepted Madame Yalta's heritage only to devote it to charity. The mansion in the Avenue de Friedland is for sale, and the proceeds will be employed in constructing an hospital for wounded labourers. The artisans mutilated in their work will be indebted for a refuge to the woman of the severed hand. The servants and allies of the countess have all left Paris. Justine has gone to Algeria with her husband, Kardiki has taken refuge in Constantinople, and is giving fencing lessons to the subjects of the Sultan; Georget has entered a naval school, and Madame Piriac has moved to Brest. But Galopardin has remained. M. Dorgères has taken him for a cashier, and the safe is well guarded now.

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